

Advice on MERS-CoV for those going for Hajj

Approximately 20,000 people from the U.K. will travel to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for Hajj each year. Many more go for Umrah throughout the year. While most will travel and return safely, Hajj may increase the risk of certain health problems; the Hajj cough, for example, is well-known.

Each year the Ministry of Health in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia issues health advice and instructions for the coming Hajj. This now includes additional advice aimed at reducing the risk of a recently discovered virus called Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus or MERS-CoV.

What is MERS-CoV?

MERS-CoV is a virus which was first seen in Jordan in 2012. Most cases have been diagnosed in the Middle East, principally the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The disease mainly affects the respiratory system and can cause serious illness, particularly in those with health problems before becoming infected. Some people have had MERS-CoV without any symptoms.

How do I know if I have MERS-CoV?

Most respiratory symptoms you may get during or after Hajj will not be serious – colds and ‘Hajj cough’ are common.

MERS-CoV usually causes an illness similar to flu or pneumonia, with fever and respiratory symptoms such as cough, shortness of breath and chest pain but some people with the infection have had been very unwell with fever and diarrhoea but have had no respiratory symptoms. If you have fever with respiratory symptoms or any other severe symptoms, either during or on return from Hajj, you should contact a doctor as soon as possible.

Preparing to go for Hajj

Certain people may be more vulnerable to respiratory illness or more likely to become seriously ill if they become infected with MERS-CoV. These individuals should seriously consider postponing Hajj this year.

The Saudi Arabia Ministry of Health strongly recommends that the following people postpone their Hajj and Umrah for their own safety:

- older people (above 65 years of age);
- those with chronic diseases (e.g. heart disease, kidney disease, respiratory disease, diabetes);
- those with a poorly functioning immune system (from any cause, including disease and medication);
- those with malignancy (cancer);
- those who are terminally ill;
- pregnant women;
- children (under 12 years).

If you are planning to go to Hajj this year and you have any medical problems, see your GP before you go to make sure you have had all the correct vaccinations and know how to manage your health problems while you are travelling.

Pack tissues and hand cleansing gel in your luggage.

At Hajj

The Ministry of Health in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the World health organisation (WHO) have provided pilgrims with health advice to reduce the spread of respiratory infections:

- wash hands with soap and water or disinfectant, especially after coughing and sneezing;
- use disposable tissues when coughing or sneezing and dispose of them appropriately;
- avoid hand contact with the eyes, nose and mouth;
- avoid direct contact with those showing symptoms of respiratory or other infections;
- practice good food-safety - avoid undercooked meat or food prepared under unsanitary conditions, wash fruit and vegetable properly before eating them and avoid unpasteurised milk or milk products, including camel's milk;
- maintain good personal hygiene;
- avoid contact with animals including camels.

If you become ill while performing Hajj, seek medical help as soon as possible.

On your return

If you are unwell, especially if you have a fever and respiratory symptoms on your return from Hajj, you should contact your GP as soon as possible. MERS-CoV is a rare disease and it is likely that any symptoms you have will not be caused by MERS-CoV, but to minimise the risk of serious illness and to protect your family, you should discuss this with your GP.

The following websites provide further advice on health issues and the Hajj:

- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Health: <http://www.moh.gov.sa/en/Pages/Default.aspx>
- The Council of British Hajjis: <http://www.cbhuk.org>
- fitfortravel: <http://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk>