

Expert explains origins, treatment of MERS

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MERS coronavirus particles (green) on camel epithelial cells. Credit: NIAID in collaboration with Colorado State University.

Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) was first reported in

Saudi Arabia in 2012 and has since become a concern in South Korea, where at least 20 deaths have been confirmed. Cases of MERS have also been reported recently in the Philippines, China and Thailand.

Mayo Clinic infectious diseases specialist Prithish Tosh, M.D., says MERS is caused by a coronavirus that originated in camels and then spread to humans. "Coronaviruses include things that cause the common cold but also cause severe respiratory illnesses. Right now the virus doesn't transmit very efficiently between people and so it really takes pretty close contact, usually in somebody who is very sick, in order to spread it."

Dr. Tosh says elderly people or those with an underlying health concerns are most vulnerable and adds there is no cure for MERS but with supportive treatment, most have recovered. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says so far, all cases of MERS have been linked to countries in and near the Arabian Peninsula. The CDC has instructed doctors and other [health care workers](#) to collect a travel history of patients and consider the possibility of a MERS infection for certain patients. Dr. Tosh says measure are being taken to contain the spread of this virus.

MERS infected patients report severe [acute respiratory illness](#) with symptoms of fever, cough, shortness of breath.

How to reduce your risk of contracting a virus:

- Vigorously wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw used tissues in the trash immediately, and then wash your hands carefully.

- Disinfect frequently touched surfaces, such as doorknobs.
- Avoid touching your face, mouth and nose with unwashed hands.
- Don't share cups, utensils or other items with sick people.

Currently there are no MERS-related travel restrictions, but visit the CDC website for the latest information and [click here](#) to learn about any new outbreaks.

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