Beat: Health

U.S. man tests positive for MERS after returning from Saudi Arabia

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USPA News - A healthcare worker from the U.S. state of Indiana who traveled to Saudi Arabia last month has been hospitalized and diagnosed with Middle East Respiratory Virus (MERS), making it the first case of the SARS-like virus in the United States, officials said on Friday. The male patient flew on board British Airways Flight 262 from the Saudi capital of Riyadh to Heathrow Airport in London on April 24 before boarding American Airlines Flight 99 to Chicago, where he took a bus to northwestern Indiana.

It was not until April 27 that the man began to experience increasing respiratory symptoms, including shortness of breath, coughing, and fever. The following day, on the evening of April 28, the man went to the Emergency Department at Community Hospital in Munster, a town southeast of Chicago, after his symptoms worsened. It was there that doctors - based on the patient`s symptoms and travel history - recognized the possibility of MERS. Indiana public health officials then tested and received a confirmation of the coronavirus. "Community Hospital recognized the possibility of the MERS infection and acted quickly to institute isolation protocols to contain the possible spread of the virus," the hospital said in a statement on Friday. It said the patient, whose identity was not made public, was in a "good" condition. The hospital said it has been working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Indiana State Department of Health (ISDH) to track people the man may have been in recent contact with, such as relatives and others who were present at the hospital. "This disease requires close contact for transmission, and the patient`s activities in the United States have been very limited and thus widespread cases are not expected," the statement added. CDC Director Tom Frieden said the agency was anticipating MERS cases in the United States and had been preparing for it in order to be able to react swiftly. "We`re doing everything possible with hospital, local, and state health officials to find people who may have had contact with this person so they can be evaluated as appropriate," he said. The new coronavirus first emerged in the Middle East in 2012 and is now known to have infected more than 400 people in 12 countries, including 93 people who died from the illness. And while there is no evidence yet of continuous human-to-human transmission, the World Health Organization (WHO) has said it appears likely that the virus is able to pass from person-to-person in the event of close contact, especially in health care facilities. It was not yet known how the patient in Munster may have been infected with the virus, but it is likely to have occurred in Saudi Arabia, where the disease first originated in 2012. The kingdom has reported a sharp increase in cases in recent weeks, worrying international health authorities as there is no vaccine or specific treatment. "It is understandable that some may be concerned about this situation, but this first U.S. case of MERS-CoV infection represents a very low risk to the general public," said Dr. Anne Schuchat, assistant surgeon general and director of CDC`s National Center for Immunizations and Respiratory Diseases. In England, health authorities said they had contacted British nationals who were sitting in the vicinity of the infected passenger on Flight 262 to provide them with health information. Public Health England said it was also working with health authorities in the United States to contact any British nationals who were on Flight 99 to Chicago. "The risk of the infection being passed to other passengers on Flight 262 is extremely low," the British government said in a statement. It said the period between exposure and symptoms for MERS is currently believed to up to fourteen days, and illnesses that passengers may develop after May 9 would not be considered related.

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