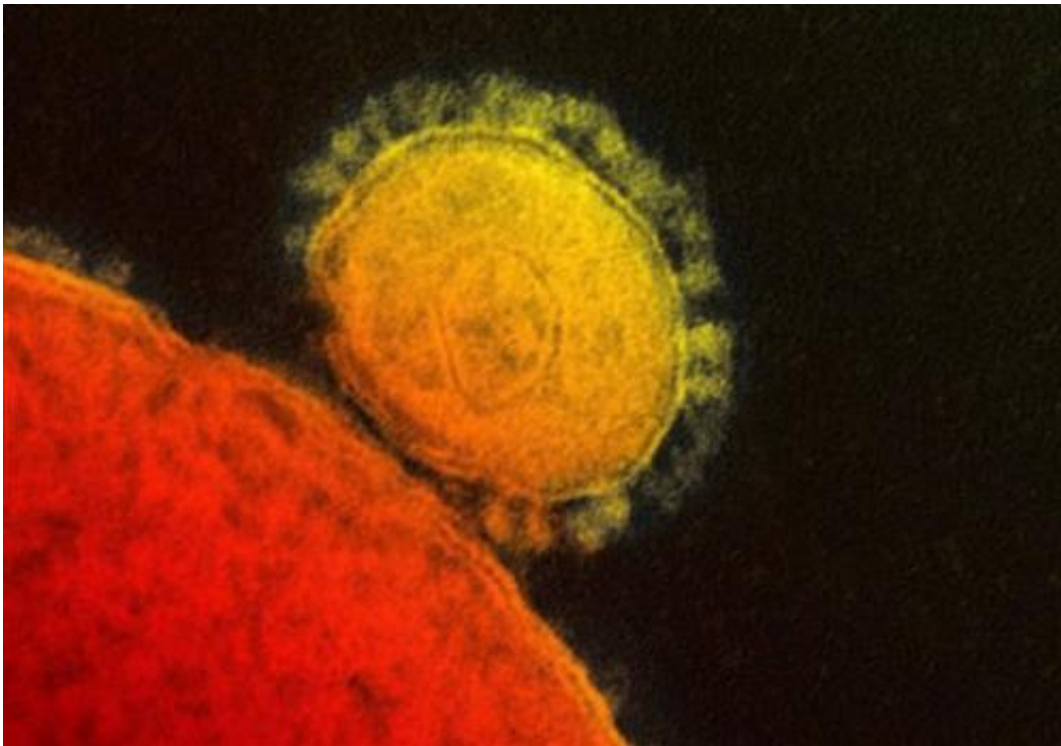


First US MERS patient could leave hospital soon (Update)

May 5 2014, by Tom Coyne



This file photo provided by the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases shows a colorized transmission of the MERS coronavirus that emerged in 2012. Health officials on Friday, May 2, 2014 said the deadly virus from the Middle East has turned up for the first time in the U.S. (AP Photo/National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases via The Canadian Press, File)

Health officials said Monday they expect the first patient in the United States diagnosed with a mysterious virus from the Middle East to be

released soon from a hospital, though he could continue to be isolated at home.

The man has been hospitalized at a hospital in Indiana state since April 28. Officials said he fell ill with Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS, after flying to the U.S. last month from Saudi Arabia, where he is a health care worker.

Overall, at least 400 people have had the respiratory illness, and more than 100 people have died. All had ties to the Middle East region or to people who traveled there.

Officials say it isn't highly contagious, but there is no cure. MERS belongs to the coronavirus family that includes the common cold and SARS, or severe acute respiratory syndrome, which caused some 800 deaths globally in 2003.

The patient in the U.S. is an American citizen, a spokesman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Monday.

Indiana State Department of Health Commissioner William VanNess II said during a news conference with officials from the hospital and CDC on Monday that no health workers or family members who've had contact with the patient have tested positive for the virus. The virus has an incubation period of two to 14 days.

About 50 hospital employees had contact with the patient before he was placed in isolation and have been isolated at home themselves, said Alan Kumar, chief medical information officer at Community Hospital.

Also as a precaution, members of the man's family have been told to stay home and wear masks if they leave, Kumar said. The virus has an incubation period of two to 14 days and appears in most cases within

five days.

The man flew from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia to the United States on April 24, with a stop in London. He landed in Chicago and took a bus to Indiana, health officials said. He went to the emergency room last Monday with a fever, cough and shortness of breath.

Federal and state officials are still trying to contact about 100 people who may have been on the airplane or bus with the patient. About three-quarters of the people on the plane had been contacted, said Dr. Daniel Feikin, an epidemiologist with the CDC.

Feikin said there are no known cases of the virus spreading through casual contact, but it was not surprising MERS had reached the United States.

"We know that infectious diseases do not respect international boundaries. In this day and age of global travel and trade, infectious diseases can spread almost anywhere," he said.

Saudi Arabia has been at the center of a Middle East outbreak of MERS that began two years ago. The virus has spread among health care workers, most notably at four facilities in that country last spring.

Officials said Monday the patient did not recall working directly with a MERS patient in Riyadh but said the hospital where he worked did have some MERS cases.

The MERS virus has been found in camels, but officials don't know how it is spreading to humans. It can spread from person to person, but officials believe that happens only after close contact. Not all those exposed to the virus become ill.

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