

Experts expect more MERS cases, downplay chance of pandemic

June 13 2015, by Kim Tong-Hyung



South Korean health workers from a community health center wearing masks as a precaution against MERS, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, virus, wait to check examinees' temperature and to sanitize their hands at a test site for a civil service examination in Seoul, South Korea, Saturday, June 13, 2015. Experts from the World Health Organization and South Korea have downplayed concerns about the MERS virus spreading further within the country, but they say it's premature to declare the outbreak over. (AP Photo/Lee Jin-man)

Experts from the World Health Organization and South Korea on Saturday downplayed concerns about the MERS virus spreading further

within the country, which recorded its 14th death and 12 new infections, but said that it was premature to declare the outbreak over.

After a weeklong review of the outbreak, the panel of experts told a news conference that there was no evidence to suggest the virus is spreading in the community. The outbreak in South Korea has so far been occurring only in hospitals, among patients, family members who visited them and medical staff treating them.

The virus has spread at a pattern similar to previous outbreaks in the Middle East, and the sequencing studies of samples from South Korea show no signs that the virus has increased its ability to transmit between humans, said WHO Assistant Director Keiji Fukuda.

While the infections seem to be stagnating, the South Korean government must continue to maintain strong control measures, such as thoroughly tracing patients' contacts and preventing suspected patients from traveling, because it's still early to declare the situation over, he added.

The continued discovery of new cases has created an impression that the outbreak is getting bigger, but Fukuda noted that many of the cases being reported were of people who were infected in the past. New infections appear to be declining, which suggests that the government's [control measures](#) are having an impact, he said.

"Now, because the outbreak has been large and is complex, more cases should be anticipated," he said.

Fukuda said that overcrowded emergency rooms and hospital wards might have contributed to a wider-than-expected transmission of the virus that usually spreads poorly between people. South Korea's habits of "doctor shopping"—visiting multiple facilities to treat the same

infection—and the custom of having many friends and [family members](#) visiting hospitalized patients might have also facilitated the spread, he said.



World Health Organization (WHO) Assistant Director General for Health Security Keiji Fukuda, left, talks with Dr. Lee Jong-koo, director of Seoul National University's JW LEE Center for Global Medicine, during a press conference about MERS at the Sejong Government Complex in Sejong, south of Seoul, South Korea Saturday, June 13, 2015. Experts from WHO and South Korea on Saturday downplayed concerns about the MERS virus spreading further within the country, but added that it was premature to declare the outbreak over. (Bae Jae-man/Yonhap via AP)

Fourteen people have died and nearly 140 have been diagnosed—including 12 new infections Saturday—with Middle East respiratory syndrome since last month in the largest [outbreak](#) outside

Saudi Arabia. Among those infected, 16 of them are in unstable condition, Jeong Eun-kyeong, a senior official from the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told reporters.

About 2,900 schools and kindergartens remained closed as of Friday, and more than 4,000 people were isolated as of Saturday after possible contacts with those infected, the Health Ministry said.

Two hospitals, including one in Seoul, also were temporarily closed after MERS patients were found to have had contact with hundreds of people at the two facilities before they were diagnosed.



World Health Organization (WHO) Assistant Director General for Health Security Keiji Fukuda, left, talks with Dr. Lee Jong-koo, director of Seoul National University's JW LEE Center for Global Medicine, during a press conference about MERS at the Sejong Government Complex in Sejong, south of Seoul, South Korea Saturday, June 13, 2015. Experts from WHO and South Korea on Saturday downplayed concerns about the MERS virus spreading

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Experts think MERS can spread in respiratory droplets, such as by coughing. But transmissions have mainly occurred through close contact, such as living with or caring for an infected person.

MERS has a death rate of about 40 percent among reported cases. It belongs to the family of coronaviruses that includes the common cold and SARS, and can cause fever, breathing problems, pneumonia and kidney failure. Most of the deaths in South Korea have been of people suffering from pre-existing medical conditions, such as respiratory problems or cancer.



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Citation: Experts expect more MERS cases, downplay chance of pandemic (2015, June 13)
retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-06-experts-mers-cases-downplay-chance.html>

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