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Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) **Information for International Travelers** **June 6, 2014**

Many New Jersey residents travel internationally for business. These travelers, and their employers, are concerned about their health. This information document is designed to convey the current worldwide situation related to MERS, and the precautions that The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) is currently recommending to minimize the risk of infection while traveling abroad.

MERS was first reported in 2012 in Saudi Arabia and is caused by a coronavirus known as Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Coronaviruses cause a variety of illnesses, from the common cold to SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome), which caused a global epidemic in 2003. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is working with the World Health Organization (WHO) and other partners to understand the public health risks from this virus. As of June 6, 2014 a total of 681 laboratory-confirmed cases including 204 deaths have been reported in 18 countries. All cases have been linked to countries in the Arabian Peninsula (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Oman, Jordan, Kuwait, Yemen, and Lebanon). This is an ongoing investigation and case counts are likely to change frequently. For the most up-to-date case counts, please visit the following WHO website: http://www.who.int/csr/don/archive/disease/coronavirus_infections/en/. Two cases were imported into the United States by health care workers who lived in Saudi Arabia and then traveled to the United States. Neither of these cases traveled through New Jersey (NJ) when contagious, and, as of this time, no NJ residents have been identified as having a confirmed case. The NJDOH continues to be vigilant for any cases of MERS that involve NJ or its residents.

While much is known about MERS-CoV, much is yet unknown. For example, while the virus clearly does not spread easily (close contact with an ill individual is required), the exact mechanism by which it spreads is not completely understood. CDC continues to work to better understand all aspects of this virus, including exactly how it spreads, and how infections might be prevented. CDC maintains up-to-date web resources which provide information on current status of health situations abroad, prevention steps that can be taken to stay healthy before and during travel and steps that should be taken if a traveler becomes ill. These web resources along with CDC travel Notices can be found at the following websites:

<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices>

<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/alert/coronavirus-arabian-peninsula-uk>

Though the current confirmed cases of MERS imported to the U.S. pose a very low risk to the general public, NJDOH would like to highlight a few current public health issues that international travelers should be made aware of.

What can travelers do to prevent MERS?

CDC does not recommend that anyone change their travel plans because of MERS. The current CDC travel notice is an Alert (Level 2), which provides special precautions for travelers. Because spread of MERS has occurred in healthcare settings, healthcare workers should exercise extra precautions. Specifically, individuals who will provide healthcare in countries in or near the Arabian Peninsula (Bahrain, Iraq, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestinian territories, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen) should follow CDC's recommendations for infection control (<http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/mers/infection-prevention-control.html>).

Travelers who are going to countries in or near the Arabian Peninsula for other reasons are advised to follow standard precautions, which can help prevent the spread of germs and protect against colds, flu, and other illnesses:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth. Germs spread this way.
- Avoid close contact with sick people.
- Be sure you are up-to-date with all of your immunizations, and if possible, see your healthcare provider at least 4–6 weeks before travel to get any additional immunizations.

If you are sick

- Cover your mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze, and throw the tissue in the trash.
- Avoid contact with other people to keep from infecting them which might mean delaying your travel until you are well.
- Travelers who develop a fever and symptoms of lower respiratory illness, such as cough or shortness of breath while traveling or within 14 days after returning from travel should see a health care provider.
- You should ensure your health care provider is aware of your recent travel.
- Tell people who have been in close contact with you to monitor their health for 14 days after the last time they were around you.

If you get sick while traveling abroad, travelers can visit the following website to help you locate medical services;

<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/getting-health-care-abroad>

Additional Resources

(CDC)General Information Page: <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/mers>

(CDC)Frequently Asked Questions & Answers: <http://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/MERS/faq.html>

(NJDOH)General information page: <http://www.state.nj.us/health/cd/mers/index.shtml>