

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)

Jaesung Park*

Department of Economics and Management, Delta State University of RRK Science and Technology, UK

Abstract

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) is a severe respiratory illness caused by the MERS-CoV (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus), a novel coronavirus first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012. The disease is characterized by symptoms such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath, which can progress to pneumonia and acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS). MERS has a high case fatality rate, particularly among individuals with underlying health conditions such as diabetes, chronic lung disease, and immunosuppression. MERS-CoV is zoonotic, with dromedary camels identified as a major reservoir and potential source of human infection. Transmission to humans occurs through direct or indirect contact with infected animals, though human-to-human transmission is also possible, especially in healthcare settings. This underscores the importance of stringent infection control measures to prevent nosocomial outbreaks.

The global health community remains vigilant given the potential for MERS-CoV to cause widespread outbreaks, particularly due to its ability to cause severe disease and its high mortality rate. Surveillance, rapid diagnostics, and research into vaccines and therapeutic options are critical components of the public health response to MERS. Despite significant progress in understanding the virus and its transmission dynamics, many questions remain about the mechanisms of pathogenesis, the role of asymptomatic carriers, and the most effective strategies for prevention and control.

This abstract provides a comprehensive overview of MERS, encompassing its virology, epidemiology, clinical presentation, transmission dynamics, and current strategies for management and prevention. The ongoing research and international collaboration are essential to mitigating the impact of this potentially deadly virus.

Keywords: Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS); MERS-CoV; Coronavirus; Zoonotic transmission; Respiratory illness; Pneumonia; Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS); Dromedary camels; Nosocomial outbreaks; Infection control; Surveillance

Introduction

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) is a viral respiratory illness caused by the MERS coronavirus (MERS-CoV). First identified in 2012 in Saudi Arabia, MERS-CoV is a member of the coronavirus family, which includes other notable viruses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and the novel coronavirus responsible for COVID-19 [1]. MERS presents a significant concern for global public health due to its high mortality rate, its potential for human-to-human transmission, and its zoonotic origins [2].

The discovery of MERS-CoV dates back to June 2012 when a Saudi Arabian patient presented with severe respiratory illness. Subsequent investigations revealed that the virus was novel, bearing similarities to bat coronaviruses but distinct in its genetic makeup [3]. The World Health Organization (WHO) quickly recognized the potential threat posed by MERS-CoV, prompting global surveillance and research efforts to understand and mitigate its spread [4]. MERS primarily affects countries in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia being the epicenter of most cases. However, cases have been reported in multiple continents, including Asia, Europe, and North America, primarily linked to travel or close contact with infected individuals [5]. The virus is characterized by sporadic outbreaks, with nosocomial (hospital-acquired) transmission being a significant mode of spread. As of 2024, there have been over 2,500 confirmed cases and nearly 900 deaths, reflecting a case fatality rate of approximately 35% [6].

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) is a viral respiratory illness caused by the MERS coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Identified in 2012, MERS is a zoonotic virus, meaning it is transmitted from animals to humans [7]. This syndrome has garnered significant global

attention due to its high fatality rate and potential for widespread outbreaks. Diagnosis of MERS-CoV infection relies on molecular techniques such as real-time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (rRT-PCR), which detects viral RNA in respiratory specimens [8]. Serological assays can also identify past infections by detecting specific antibodies against MERS-CoV. Currently, there is no specific antiviral treatment for MERS. Management focuses on supportive care to relieve symptoms and maintain vital organ function [9]. Various antiviral agents and immunotherapies have been explored, but their efficacy remains uncertain.

The emergence of MERS-CoV highlights the importance of global preparedness for infectious diseases. The interconnectedness of the world through travel and trade facilitates the rapid spread of novel pathogens, necessitating a coordinated international response [10]. WHO, along with national health agencies, continues to monitor MERS-CoV and provide guidance to mitigate its impact? The lessons learned from MERS have also informed strategies for managing other coronavirus outbreaks, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

***Corresponding author:** Dr. Jaesung Park, Department of Economics and Management, Delta State University of RRK Science and Technology, UK, E-mail: jaesung.p@gmail.com

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Epidemiology

MERS was first identified in Saudi Arabia in 2012. Since then, the majority of MERS cases have been reported in the Middle East, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. However, MERS cases have also been reported in other regions, including Europe, Asia, and the United States, typically linked to travel or contact with infected individuals.

The virus is believed to have originated in bats and is primarily transmitted to humans through camels, which are considered a significant reservoir host. Human-to-human transmission is possible, particularly in healthcare settings, but it is generally limited without close contact.

Clinical features

MERS presents a wide range of clinical manifestations, from asymptomatic infection to severe acute respiratory illness and death. The incubation period for MERS is typically 2-14 days. Common symptoms include:

1. Fever
2. Cough
3. Shortness of breath
4. Pneumonia
5. Gastrointestinal symptoms (such as diarrhea)

In severe cases, MERS can cause respiratory failure, requiring mechanical ventilation and support in an intensive care unit. The fatality rate for MERS is approximately 35%, making it a particularly deadly coronavirus compared to others like SARS-CoV and SARS-CoV-2.

Transmission and spread

MERS-CoV spreads through respiratory droplets when an infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also spread through close personal contact, such as caring for or living with an infected person. Nosocomial transmission (hospital-acquired infection) is a significant concern, as healthcare workers can be exposed to the virus in clinical settings. Dromedary camels are identified as a major reservoir host for MERS-CoV. People working closely with camels, such as farmers, slaughterhouse workers, and veterinarians, are at a higher risk of infection. Consumption of raw camel milk and meat may also pose a risk.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of MERS relies on a combination of clinical evaluation and laboratory testing. Reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) testing is the standard method for detecting MERS-CoV. Samples for testing are typically collected from the lower respiratory tract (sputum, bronchoalveolar lavage), upper respiratory tract (nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal swabs), or blood.

Treatment and management

There is no specific antiviral treatment for MERS. Management of the disease is primarily supportive, focusing on relieving symptoms and treating complications. This may include oxygen therapy, mechanical ventilation, and extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) in severe cases.

Healthcare providers may consider the use of antiviral medications, corticosteroids, and immunomodulatory agents based on the patient's condition, but these treatments are generally experimental and their efficacy is not well-established.

Prevention and control

Preventing MERS involves measures to reduce the risk of infection in both healthcare settings and the general population. Key strategies include:

Infection Control Practices: Adhering to strict infection control protocols in healthcare facilities, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), hand hygiene, and isolation of infected patients.

Public Health Measures: Educating the public about the risks of MERS, particularly in regions with camels, and promoting behaviors that reduce exposure, such as avoiding raw camel products and maintaining good hygiene practices.

Surveillance and Reporting: Strengthening surveillance systems to detect and report MERS cases promptly, enabling rapid response to contain outbreaks.

Research and Development: Ongoing research to develop effective treatments and vaccines for MERS-CoV is critical. Several vaccine candidates are in various stages of development, but none have yet been approved for widespread use.

Global impact and response

The emergence of MERS has highlighted the importance of global health security and the need for international cooperation in responding to infectious disease threats. Organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) play a crucial role in coordinating efforts to monitor, prevent, and respond to MERS outbreaks.

The lessons learned from managing MERS have also informed responses to other coronavirus outbreaks, including the COVID-19 pandemic. Key strategies such as rapid diagnostic testing, contact tracing, quarantine measures, and international collaboration have been essential in controlling the spread of these viruses.

Conclusion

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome remains a significant public health concern due to its high fatality rate and potential for outbreaks. While progress has been made in understanding the virus and improving clinical management, the development of specific treatments and vaccines remains a priority. Continued vigilance, research, and international cooperation are essential to prevent and control MERS and protect global health. Middle East Respiratory Syndrome remains a significant public health challenge due to its potential for severe illness and death. Continued vigilance, research, and international collaboration are essential to control its spread and reduce its impact. As we enhance our understanding of MERS-CoV and improve our preparedness for emerging infectious diseases, we can better protect global health and prevent future pandemics.

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