

Current major event

Preparedness for hajj

According to Islamic lunar calendar, hajj, the annual Muslim pilgrimage, is expected to be held this year in Saudi Arabia during the week of 21-26 September. In view of a number of public health events currently ongoing around the world from where the Muslim pilgrims would assemble in Saudi Arabia for the hajj, there is an urgent need to scale up preparedness for a blessed hajj.

Editorial note

Hajj is the largest annual mass gathering in the world and it takes place every year in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This gathering brings more than 3 million pilgrims into Mecca from 188 countries across the world. Of these pilgrims, an estimated 1.75 million are foreigner visitors and another 1.4 million are local pilgrims coming from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

The inevitable overcrowding of such large number of pilgrims in a relatively confined area within limited time poses serious and important public health risks. It is also possible that emerging infectious diseases that may not be endemic in the Kingdom might be imported by the international visitors, but also the returning pilgrims can introduce such infectious diseases to their home countries causing a global health emergency.

An outbreak of meningitis caused by serogroup A and W135 occurred during the hajj of 1987, 2000 and 2001 among pilgrims, but the same bacteria was imported by returning pilgrims to over twelve countries around the world. Immediately after the hajj. Given this past experience, it is imperative to take precautionary measures to minimize disease occurrence during the hajj and also after the completion of the hajj. This can only be achieved through better preparedness measures as well as through improving coordination and information sharing between the Saudi Ministry of Health and the countries sending the pilgrims.

This year's hajj poses a potential threat from some of the outbreaks currently

Epidemiological situation of meningococcal meningitis in Africa, 01 January-30 June 2015

Country	Cases	Deaths	Causative organism
Niger	9407	640	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup C
Nigeria	2595	129	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup C
Sudan	54	1	-
Ghana	282	33	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup C
Cameroun	685	36	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup W135
Mali	201	5	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup C and W135
Chad	159	25	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup W135
Burkina Faso	2148	232	Neisseria meningitides, serogroup A

Past major health events related to hajj

1. Meningococcal meningitis caused by serogroup W135 in 2000: > 400 cases in Saudi Arabia and in 12 other countries
2. Meningococcal meningitis caused by serogroup A in 1987: Outbreak reported in Saudi Arabia and two other countries
3. Cholera in 1989: 102 cases in Saudi Arabia

ongoing across different continents from where the Muslim pilgrims are expected to assemble for the hajj. These include the outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus (MERS-CoV) in the Middle East, Polio in Pakistan, the Ebola Viral Diseases (EVD), meningococcal meningitis (*please see the above table*) and cholera outbreak in Africa.

What would be important to counter these threats to prevent any epidemic during and also in the aftermath of hajj would be to improve preparedness across all countries. In this regard, one most important step would be to ensure the health advisory for travelers for the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) issued by the Ministry of Health of Saudi Arabia. This will require strict adherence to requirements by all countries as well as intensive health education and awareness raising amongst the pilgrims about available preventive measures. Preventing any international spread of public health event remains a collective and shared responsibility. It is expected that all countries will rise to the occasion and ensure a blessed hajj for all free from any public health event.

Update on outbreaks

in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

MERS-CoV in Saudi Arabia

Current public health events of international concern

[cumulative N° of cases (deaths), CFR %]

Avian Influenza : 2006-2015

Egypt (A/H5N1)	[346 (117), 33.8%]
Egypt (A/H9N2)	[3 (0)]

MERS-CoV: 2012-2015

Saudi Arabia	[1041 (459), 44%]
Jordan	[12 (6), 50%]
Oman	[6 (3), 50%]
UAE	[75 (10), 13.3%]
Kuwait	[3 (1), 33.3%]
Republic of Korea	[185 (36), 19.4%]
Qatar	[12 (4), 33.3%]
Yemen	[1 (1), 100%]
Egypt	[1 (0), 0%]
Lebanon	[1 (0), 0%]
Iran	[6 (2), 33.3%]

Ebola Virus Disease: 2014-2015

Guinea	[3760(2506),66.6%]
Liberia	[10673 (4808),45%]
Sierra Leone	[13209 (3940),29.8%]
UK	[1(0)]
Nigeria	[20 (8),40%]
Senegal	[1(0)]
Spain	[1(0)]
Italy	[1 (0)]
USA	[4(1),25%]
Mali	[8(6),75%]

Wild poliovirus: 2014-2015

Pakistan	[325 (0)]
Afghanistan	[29(0)]