

Current major event

MERS surveillance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

In 2020, a total of 60 cases of MERS were reported to WHO from 3 countries: Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar, with the majority reported from Saudi Arabia (57 cases). The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the surveillance of MERS among humans, as evident by the lack of case reports globally since week 22.

Editorial note

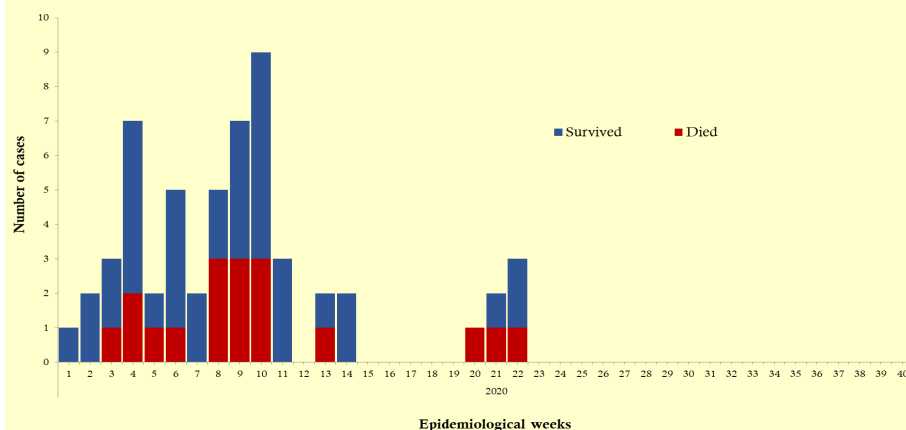
In many countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region, developing the capacities for preparedness and response to Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV) has directly and indirectly improved the overall preparedness to other emerging epidemic-prone diseases, especially coronaviruses such as SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. For example, the workforce of the MERS surveillance systems is well trained in a range of areas including case identification, surveillance, laboratory detection, clinical management, infection prevention and control, and risk communication.

Since 2012, Saudi Arabia pioneered the building of surveillance systems for MERS-CoV and continues to make commendable effort to strengthen its national MERS surveillance and response system. The country has extensive experience in dealing with MERS-CoV outbreaks and, in recent years, has demonstrated its ability to reduce human infections including human-to-human transmission in health care settings. The strengths of the system were successfully leveraged for building the COVID-19 surveillance system and enabling rapid detection, isolation, testing and management of cases. However, as national resources were redirected towards the control of COVID-19 transmission, it was inevitable for the surveillance of MERS, as well as other respiratory diseases, to be impacted.

Sixty cases of MERS, including 19 associated deaths, were reported to WHO this year (57 of the cases had their symptom onset in 2020) (*see table*). Two of the cases were reported from United Arab Emirates in January and one case was reported from Qatar in February. Saudi Arabia continued to report cases, including one hospital outbreak, up to week 22 in May (*see graph*).

It is possible that the MERS case reporting has decreased due to a decrease in testing,

MERS reported cases per week of onset in Saudi Arabia, Week 1—40; 2020



MERS cases reported globally, by year, based on symptom onset (2012-2020)

Year	Died	Survived	Total
2012	6	3	9
2013	99	87	186
2014	288	468	756
2015	225	452	677
2016	80	180	260
2017	67	180	247
2018	41	105	146
2019	56	168	224
2020	19	38	57
Total	881	1681	2562

as laboratory resources were diverted to detect SARS-CoV-2. The lack of detection could also be attributed to the increased community awareness on prevention measures for COVID-19, which are similar for MERS prevention. Additionally, community-level public health and social measures put in place to control COVID-19 could have contributed to reducing close interactions, particularly in often crowded places (religious gatherings, markets).

In view of these considerations, WHO advises countries to re-activate or maintain both their MERS and influenza surveillance, especially as the 2020-21 Northern Hemisphere influenza season has started in some countries of the Region. WHO also advises countries to maintain strong One Health coordination and surveillance mechanisms at the human-animal interface. It is also of utmost importance to maintain effective infection prevention and control measures in health care facilities to prevent outbreaks of COVID-19, MERS or influenza. Researchers are encouraged to consult the WHO R&D blueprint guidance for COVID-19 while setting research plans in order to support current pandemic response and better prepare for the next unforeseen epidemic.

Update on outbreaks

in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

COVID-19 in 22 EMR countries

Current public health events of concern

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

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): 2019-2020

Afghanistan	[39 341 (1453), 3.7%]
Bahrain	[72 310 (258), 0.4%]
Djibouti	[5418 (61), 1.1%]
Egypt	[103 575 (5970), 5.8%]
Iran (Islamic Republic of)	[468 119 (26 746), 5.7%]
Iraq	[375 931 (9347), 2.5%]
Jordan	[14 749 (88), 0.6%]
Kuwait	[106 458 (620), 0.6%]
Lebanon	[43 480 (398), 0.9%]
Libya	[36 809 (592), 1.6%]
Morocco	[131 228 (2293), 1.7%]
occupied Palestinian territory (oPt)	[52 013 (390), 0.7%]
Oman	[98 585 (935), 0.9%]
Pakistan	[314 616 (6513), 2.1%]
Qatar	[126 339 (216), 0.2%]
Saudi Arabia	[335 997 (4850), 1.4%]
Somalia	[3593 (99), 2.8%]
Sudan	[13 660 (836), 6.1%]
Syrian Arab Republic	[4329 (204), 4.7%]
Tunisia	[23 453 (321), 1.4%]
United Arab Emirates	[97760 (426), 0.4%]
Yemen	[2045 (590), 28.9%]