

Hajj and Umrah, 2013

The information below reflects the most current data available as of September 23, 2013. Visit <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/watch/coronavirus-arabian-peninsula-uk> for continued updates.

The annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, is among the largest mass gatherings in the world. This year, it will take place from approximately October 13 to 18. Hajj draws about 3 million Muslims from around the world, and more than 11,000 Americans make the pilgrimage each year.

Umrah is a similar pilgrimage that can be undertaken at any time of the year, but it is likely to be more crowded during the month of Ramadan (approximately July 9 to August 7, 2013) than at other times of the year.

Because of the crowds, mass gatherings such as Hajj and Umrah are associated with unique health risks.

Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS)

MERS is a respiratory illness that has sickened a number of people in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia. Most people who got sick with MERS had severe illness with fever, cough, and shortness of breath. A majority of fatal cases of MERS have occurred among patients with underlying medical conditions.



Because of the risk of MERS, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Health has recommended that the following groups should postpone their plans for Hajj and Umrah this year:

- People over 65 years old
- Children under 12 years old
- Pregnant women
- People with chronic diseases (such as heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes, or respiratory disease)
- People with weakened immune systems
- People with cancer or terminal illnesses

CDC encourages pilgrims traveling to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj or Umrah to consider this advice. Pilgrims who are concerned about MERS should discuss their travel plans with their doctor.

The virus that causes MERS can spread from person to person through close contact, so pilgrims living and traveling in crowded conditions may be at risk. Pilgrims can help protect themselves from respiratory diseases by washing their hands often ; not touching their mouth, nose, or eyes; and avoiding contact with sick people. (Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/> to learn more about hand washing.) They should pay attention to their health when traveling in the Arabian Peninsula and seek medical care if they develop a fever with cough or shortness of breath within 14 days after returning from their trip.

To learn more about CDC's travel recommendations for MERS, please see the travel health notice, A Novel Coronavirus Called "MERS-CoV" in the Arabian Peninsula at <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/watch/coronavirus-arabian-peninsula-uk>.

Other Diseases

Because they bring together large numbers of people from all around the world, mass gatherings such as Hajj and Umrah can increase the risk for infectious diseases. Outbreaks of meningococcal disease used to be a problem, so the Saudi Ministry of Health requires all pilgrims to receive the meningococcal vaccine, and neither Hajj nor Umrah visas can be issued without proof of vaccination. Polio vaccine is not required

for pilgrims from the United States, but it's best to receive an adult booster before travel. CDC also recommends vaccination against hepatitis A and B and typhoid for travel to Saudi Arabia, and all travelers, regardless of destination, should be up-to-date on routine vaccines (such as measles and pertussis) and should receive an annual flu shot.

Since not all infectious diseases can be prevented by vaccines, pilgrims should practice good hygiene and avoid contact with animals. Diarrhea is common during Hajj and Umrah, so eat only food that is cooked and served hot and drink only beverages from sealed containers. Men are required to shave their heads after Hajj (many men shave their heads after Umrah as well), and unclean blades can transmit disease. Male pilgrims should go to officially designated centers to be shaved, where barbers are licensed and use disposable, single-use blades.

Injuries

Being caught in a human stampede is a major fear of many people attending a mass gathering. Stampedes at previous Hajj events have injured or killed hundreds, most recently in 2006. However, the Saudi government has spent more than \$25 billion to help thin crowds and minimize this risk. To further protect yourself, try to avoid the most densely congested areas and always be aware of the location of emergency exits. Saudi religious authorities have also expanded the times when certain rituals can be performed, and pilgrims can expect fewer crowds if they perform these rituals during nonpeak hours.

Heat-Related Illnesses



Temperatures in Mecca can easily exceed 100°F in the summer and early fall. Heat exhaustion and heatstroke are leading causes of illness in people undertaking Hajj or Umrah during these months. Pilgrims should drink plenty of bottled water, wear sunscreen, rest, and seek shade as much as possible. Pilgrims who are fasting for Ramadan and cannot drink water during daylight hours should be sure to rehydrate after dusk. Some rituals can be performed at night to avoid daytime heat. Symptoms of heat-related illness can include profuse sweating, chills, headache, dizziness or confusion, and nausea. Travelers who develop these symptoms should move to a cool area and seek medical care.

More Information

- CDC Travel Notice: A Novel Coronavirus Called “MERS- CoV” in the Arabian Peninsula:
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/notices/watch/coronavirus-arabian-peninsula-uk>
- Hajj Pilgrimage, CDC Health Information for International Travel (The Yellow Book)
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2014/chapter-4-select-destinations/saudi-arabia-hajj-pilgrimage>
- CDC Advice for Travel to Mass Gatherings
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/travel-to-mass-gatherings>
- CDC Advice for Travel to Hot Climates
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/travel-to-hot-climates>
- CDC Health Information for Travelers to Saudi Arabia
<http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/saudi-arabia>
- Embassy of Saudi Arabia (Washington, DC) Hajj Requirements
http://saudiembassy.net/services/hajj_requirements.aspx
- WHO – World –travel advice on MERS-CoV for pilgrimages
<http://www.who.int/ith/updates/20130725/en/>



For more information, visit
www.cdc.gov/travel or call 800-CDC-INFO
(800-232-4636)