

MERS virus found in camels in Qatar, linked to human spread



// By Amena Bakr and Kate Kelland November 28, 2013



FILE - In this Wednesday, July 3, 2013 file photo, an employee feeds a camel a carrot at the Camelicious milk farm in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Scientists have found a clue that suggests camels may be involved in infecting people in the Middle East with the MERS virus. In a preliminary study published on Friday, Aug. 9, 2013, European scientists found traces of antibodies against the MERS virus in dromedary, or one-humped, camels, but not the virus itself. (AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili, File)

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DOHA/LONDON (Reuters) - Scientists have found cases of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in camels in Qatar, health officials said on Thursday, fuelling speculation that camels might be the animal reservoir that allowed the virus to infect and kill humans.

The SARS-like coronavirus, which emerged in the Middle East last year and has killed almost 40 percent of the around 170 people so far infected, was found in three camels in a herd in a barn also linked to two human cases of MERS infection.

"The three camels were investigated among a herd of 14 camels, and the samples were collected as part of the epidemiological investigation," Qatar's Supreme Council of Health said in a statement.

British researchers who conducted some of the very first genetic analyses on MERS last September said the virus, which is from the same family as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, or SARS, was also related to a virus found in bats.

Confirming and commenting on the virus being found in camels in Qatar, WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl said there was still insufficient evidence to say for sure what the source of the human MERS infections was.

"Neither camels nor bats can yet be said to be reservoir of MERS," he said on the networking site Twitter.

Ab Osterhaus, a professor of virology at the Erasmus Medical Centre in The Netherlands that worked on the camel study, told Reuters the results were confirmed by a range of tests including sequencing and antibody testing.

Dutch scientists said in August they had found strong evidence that the MERS virus is widespread among one-humped dromedary camels in the Middle East - suggesting people who become infected may be catching it from camels used for meat, milk, transport and racing.

Saudi officials said this month that a camel there had tested positive for MERS a few days after its owner was confirmed to have the virus.

The World Health Organization (WHO) said in its latest MERS update on November 22 that of the 176 laboratory-confirmed and probable reported human cases to date, 69 people had died.

Human cases of MERS, which can cause coughing, fever and pneumonia, have so far been reported in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Tunisia, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Britain.

Osterhaus, whose team worked with Qatar's Health and Environment Ministries on the study, said that, at this stage, "no more details can be disclosed" about the findings since a scientific paper was in the process of being prepared and submitted for peer review and publication.

The Qatari health council said, however, as a precaution, the elderly and people with underlying health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and respiratory illnesses should avoid any close animal contact when visiting farms and markets.

(Editing by Keiron Henderson and Alison Williams)