Second U.S. MERS case reported

ORLANDO, Fla. – A growing global threat of the potentially deadly MERS virus has spread to Orlando with the case of a 44-year-old man visiting from Saudi Arabia, health officials reported Monday.

He becomes the second U.S. patient with the respiratory illness, which has infected more than 500 people worldwide and killed 114.

MERS – or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome – is considered serious because of its fatality rate of about 30 percent and because there is no vaccine or specific antiviral treatment. But health officials emphasize that it is spread only through close contact, including touching, coughing or contaminated fluids. About one-fifth of those infected are health care workers, as is the Orlando patient.

The man, who works in a Saudi Arabia hospital, arrived in Orlando on May 1 but did not seek treatment until May 8, when he went to the Dr. P. Phillips emergency room. A trio of laboratory tests confirmed MERS.

“The patient is in good condition and is improving,” said Dr. Antonio Crespo, an infectious disease specialist and chief quality officer for the hospital, part of Orlando Health. “We are taking every precaution, but believe the risk of transmission from this patient is very low since his symptoms were mild and he was not coughing when he arrived at the hospital.”

Symptoms of the virus include congestion, cough, fever higher than 100.4 degrees, shortness of breath, pneumonia, body aches and diarrhea.