In 2015, South Korea experienced an outbreak of Middle East respiratory syndrome, or MERS. Between May and July, 186 people contracted the MERS virus; 38 eventually died. This diagram shows how quickly the pathogen spread within and between hospitals via a handful of “superspreaders.” — Tina Hesman Saey

Male, 35 years old
May 27–29
A man who shared a hospital room with the first patient in the South Korean MERS outbreak infected the most people. On May 27, he went to Samsung Medical Center in Seoul, where he had to wait in the emergency room for a bed to become available. Over the next two and a half days, more than 80 people who had passed through the ER contracted the virus.

Male, 68 years old
May 15–17
South Korean officials traced the MERS outbreak to a businessman who visited the Middle East in April and early May. Soon after returning, the man was admitted to St. Mary’s Hospital in Pyeongtaek, where he infected about 30 people, mostly visitors and fellow patients.

Male, 40 years old
May 25–30
A patient’s visits to two hospitals led to 27 infections. Overall the virus reached dozens of health centers (not all labeled), in part because South Koreans tend to shop around for the best care.

Female, 75 years old
June 5–6
An elderly woman spread the virus to 11 other people in a fourth round of infection. Multiple rounds of infection are a concern because sustained transmission can lead to a pandemic.

Anatomy of a MERS outbreak

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Legend
- Patient
- Patient, deceased
- Superspreader
- Visitor
- Visitor, deceased
- Health care worker
- Health care worker, deceased
- Transmission route
- Possible transmission route
- Hospitals, major exposure dates

St. Mary’s Hospital May 15–17
Sacred Heart Hospital May 27–31
Good Morning Hospital May 25–27
Samsung Medical Center May 27–29
Konkuk University Hospital June 6
Ambulance June 6
Kyung Hee University Hospital June 5–6
St. Mary’s Hospital
May 15–17
Daejeon Dae Cheong Hospital May 25–28
Konyang University Hospital May 28–30
Sacred Heart Hospital May 27–31
Unknown exposure
Ambulance June 6
Daejeon Dae Cheong Hospital May 25–28
Konyang University Hospital May 28–30
Sacred Heart Hospital May 27–31
Unknown exposure