

Ebola



Deadly Viral Infection

Ebola is a serious and often fatal viral infection first identified in Central Africa in 1976. A recent and serious outbreak of this virus occurred in West African countries in 2014. Unlike common viral infections such as influenza, Ebola is not very contagious. It is not spread by coughing or sneezing, but requires direct contact with infected bodily fluids and skin or mucous membranes. Symptoms of an Ebola infection appear up to 21 days after exposure. In the beginning, fever, headache, muscle aches, and diarrhea are common; rash, red eyes, and bleeding can follow later. Death is due to organ failure. Currently, no drugs are approved to treat Ebola infections, although there are several preventive vaccines in the testing stages.

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Disease Is Spread Through Direct Contact Only

Ebola was first identified in 1976 in Central Africa, and more recently it has appeared in West African countries as well. The current Ebola outbreak began in December 2013 and has affected several countries in West Africa, primarily Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. There have also been a few isolated cases in the United States and Europe. It has been the most deadly Ebola outbreak to date, with more than 22,500 cases and about 9,000 deaths recorded as of February 2015.



Healthcare workers must wear protective gear when treating patients with Ebola.

How Is the Virus Transmitted?

The Ebola virus infects humans and other primates (gorillas, chimpanzees, monkeys) and likely first spreads from an infected animal, such as a bat, to a human at the beginning of an outbreak. There are four species of the Ebola virus in African countries that are known to cause infection in humans, and a fifth species that causes disease in primates only.

Ebola viruses are spread only through *direct contact* between a break in the skin or through a mucous membrane (eyes, nose, or mouth) of a healthy person and the infected bodily fluid from a person infected with Ebola (alive or dead). Bodily fluids include blood, mucus, saliva, vomit, tears, sweat, urine, feces, breast milk, and semen.

What Symptoms Should I Look Out For?

Symptoms of an Ebola infection can occur from 2 to 21 days after a person is exposed to the virus. After 21 days, a person exposed to the Ebola virus will not develop the infection. Symptoms of Ebola infection include fever greater than 101.5°F, chills, headache, muscle aches, poor appetite, stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea, rash, and bleeding. A person can only spread the Ebola virus when he or she develops symptoms.

An Ebola infection is diagnosed with a blood test. The Ebola test is usually positive when symptoms such as fever first appear, but it may take up to 3 days from the appearance of symptoms to confirm that the virus is present. If Ebola infection is suspected, the patient is confined until laboratory testing is complete. If a patient tests positive for the Ebola virus, he or she is treated in a hospital in an isolation unit to prevent further spread.

Are Any Treatments Available?

There is no specific treatment currently for Ebola infection. The goal of treatment is to support breathing, blood pressure, fluid balance, and organs such as the heart and kidneys while the patient develops an immune response to the virus. Patients are given IV fluids, oxygen, and drugs to correct any complications that develop from the infection.

Currently, there are several experimental drugs in development to treat patients with Ebola infection, but none are approved. Vaccines to prevent Ebola are also being tested in West Africa, with promising early results.

Am I at Risk?

An outbreak of Ebola infection is very unlikely in the U.S. Screening of travelers from countries with Ebola outbreaks is going on in five U.S. airports through which travelers are routed. It is important to remember that the Ebola virus is only spread by people with symptoms, and it is not spread through the air or by casual contact. For the latest information on Ebola infections, treatment, and vaccine information, as well as travel advisories, the best source is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at www.cdc.gov/ebola.