

Get the Facts: Ebola Virus

The 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa is the largest in history and the first to affect individuals in multiple countries. Although the Ebola outbreak is a humanitarian crisis in West Africa, the epidemic does not pose a significant risk to the U.S. public. The Ebola virus does not spread easily. This fact sheet explains some basics about the illness.

What is Ebola?

Ebola is a hemorrhagic fever virus that has appeared sporadically since its initial recognition in 1976 and named after a river in the Democratic Republic of Congo in Africa, where it was first recognized. The virus has also been identified in bats and primates. Ebola causes severe illness. Between 50 and 90% of humans who become infected with the virus die.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of Ebola include: fever, headache, joint and muscle aches, weakness, diarrhea, vomiting, stomach pain, lack of appetite and abnormal bleeding. Some patients may have a rash, red eyes, hiccups, cough, sore throat, chest pain, difficulty breathing or swallowing or bleeding inside or outside the body.

Symptoms most commonly start 8-10 days after coming in contact with the Ebola virus but can occur as early as 2 days and up to 21 days after exposure.

How is Ebola spread?

The Ebola virus is spread by direct contact with blood or other body fluids (vomit, diarrhea, urine, breast milk, sweat, semen) of an infected person who has symptoms or with a person who has recently died from Ebola. It may also be spread through objects or surfaces contaminated by body fluids of a person infected with Ebola virus, for example clothing or bedding. Ebola is not spread through the air or by water, or in general food. However, in Africa, Ebola may be spread as a result of handling bush meat (wild animals hunted for food) and contact with infected bats. It can also be spread by eating an animal that was infected with Ebola, including bats.

A person infected with the Ebola virus CANNOT pass it on to others before any symptoms appear.

Who is at risk for Ebola?

The risk of catching Ebola in the general public is extremely low. Healthcare providers or family members who care for patients infected with Ebola are at increased risk because they may come into contact with blood or other body fluids.

What treatment is available?

There is no licensed treatment or vaccine for Ebola virus disease, though both are under investigation. Treatment for Ebola is supportive with intravenous fluids, maintaining blood pressure and oxygenation and treating additional infections if present.

How can I protect myself?

Avoid non-essential travel to areas affected by the Ebola virus disease outbreak. If you are in an affected area:

- Avoid contact with blood and body fluids of those who are ill.
- Do not handle items that have come in contact an infected person's blood or body fluids.
- Use protective clothing (gloves, gown, masks and eyewear) when caring for sick persons.
- Avoid contact with sick or dead animals and do not eat wild animals or bush meat.
- Avoid funeral or burial rituals that require handling the body.
- Avoid hospitals where patients with Ebola are being treated.
- Monitor your health for 21 days after leaving the affected area. Seek medical care immediately if you develop symptoms of Ebola.