



Information on Ebola: Outbreak in West Africa

Ebola virus disease

Ebola virus disease is a severe disease which affects humans and other primates, and is a form of viral haemorrhagic disease. There are five known species of Ebola virus, of which four have caused disease in humans.

The disease was first identified in 1976, and outbreaks have periodically occurred since then. These outbreaks have tended to occur in remote villages close to tropical rainforests in Central Africa. However, the largest ever recorded outbreak is currently underway in three countries in West Africa, where the virus has not previously been reported: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The incubation period of Ebola virus disease ranges from 2 to 21 days. The onset of illness is sudden, with fever, headache, joint and muscle pain, sore throat and intense weakness. This is then followed by diarrhoea, vomiting, rash, impaired kidney and liver function and stomach pain. Some patients may develop a rash, red eyes, hiccups, internal and external bleeding.

Ebola haemorrhagic fever is fatal in between 50-90% of cases. No specific treatment or vaccine has yet been developed.

The source of Ebola

The exact source of Ebola virus is not known, despite extensive investigations. However, the virus is thought to come from fruit bats, and it affects other animals such as chimpanzees, gorillas, monkeys and porcupines.

Humans can be infected through contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected animal. Once this has occurred, the infection can be passed from person to person. The harvesting of migrating fruit bats was thought to be the source of a large outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2007.

Routes of spread

Ebola virus spreads from animals to humans through contact with blood, secretions organs or other bodily fluids of an infected animal. The virus can then be transmitted onward to other people through direct contact with the blood or other body fluids from an infected person. This includes contact with objects (such as needles or soiled clothing) that have been contaminated with infected body fluids.

Hospital workers have frequently been infected in Ebola outbreaks through close contact with infected patients, where correct infection control precautions and barrier nursing procedures are not sufficiently used. Outbreaks have also been fuelled by

burial practices in which mourners have direct contact with the bodies of the deceased. The disease can also be transmitted via sexual contact with a person who is infected or who is recovering from the disease, as the virus is present in semen for up to 7 weeks after recovery.

Ebola virus disease is not spread through ordinary social contact with people who are well, such as shaking hands or sitting next to someone.

The outbreak in West Africa

The current outbreak of Ebola in West Africa was first reported in March 2014, and involves three countries: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. This is already the largest ever known outbreak of Ebola, and the first to have been seen in these countries.

In the early stages it was expected that the outbreak would be brought under control fairly rapidly. However, in recent weeks there has been a significant increase in the number of new cases, with spread to previously unaffected areas as well as resurgence in other areas. Regular updates on the outbreak including the areas and number of people affected are available from the World Health Organisation: <http://www.who.int/csr/don/archive/disease/ebola/en>.

Experts (including staff from Public Health England) are collaborating in the international response to the outbreak. Monitoring and control measures are being implemented in all affected areas with the support of WHO, UNICEF, Médecins Sans Frontières and others.

Risk to travellers to West Africa

The risk of a traveller contracting Ebola is very low in the absence of direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected person or animal.

Risk to people in the UK

No Ebola cases have ever occurred amongst people returning to the UK from Africa, and it is unlikely that any such cases will occur in this outbreak. However, the incubation period of Ebola virus ranges from 2 to 21 days, and so whilst unlikely, it is possible that a person infected in Guinea, Liberia or Sierra Leone could arrive in the UK before developing symptoms. For this reason, travellers returning from affected areas who have symptoms such as fever, headache, sore throat and general malaise within three weeks of their return should seek rapid medical attention, and inform the healthcare professional of their recent travel to West Africa.

Should a case occur in someone returning from the affected areas, the risk of onward transmission to others in the UK would be extremely low.

Sources of further information

Regularly updated information from Public Health England about Ebola (including the outbreak and maps of affected area): <http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/Ebola/>

WHO information on Ebola:

<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/en/index.html>

Ebola virus disease - risk assessment of outbreak in West Africa:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ebola-virus-disease-risk-assessment-of-outbreak-in-west-africa>

Advice for UK citizens travelling to affected countries to participate in humanitarian aid and healthcare delivery:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ebola-virus-disease-information-for-humanitarian-aid-workers>

General travel health information and advice:

<http://www.nathnac.org>