What You Should Know About

The Ebola Virus Disease

Cases of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) and deaths continue to be reported in Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Senegal. EVD outbreaks are currently occurring primarily in remote villages in Central and West Africa, near tropical rainforests. A separate outbreak of EVD, which is not related to the outbreak in West Africa, is occurring in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Ebola virus is a serious and often fatal illness that has been in the news in recent weeks. The outbreak has occurred only in four African countries, but last week the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it "public health emergency of international concern." Here are some basic questions and answers about Ebola.

What is the Ebola virus, where has it been found?

Ebola is an often fatal viral haemorrhagic fever that was first discovered in 1976. It spreads only through direct contact with an infected person's or wild animal's body fluids (e.g. saliva, urine). Ebola is not airborne. Ebola virus has been reported in four West African countries - Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Nigeria.

Who's at risk? How great is the risk if you live in the UK?

The risk of contracting Ebola in the UK is extremely small.

Anyone who has been in the affected countries and arrives in the UK with a fever is being screened and tested. If an infected person did arrive, standard infection control procedures would be expected to keep the disease from spreading.

How is Ebola virus spread?

When an infection does occur in humans, the virus can be spread in several ways to others. The virus is spread through direct contact (through broken skin or mucous membranes) with

- a sick person's blood or body fluids (urine, saliva, faeces, vomit, and semen)
- objects (such as needles) that have been contaminated with infected body fluids
- infected animals

Healthcare workers and the family and friends in close contact with Ebola patients are at the highest risk of getting sick because they may come in contact with infected blood or body fluids.

During outbreaks of Ebola Virus, the disease can spread quickly within healthcare settings (such as a clinic or hospital). Exposure to Ebola Viruses can occur in healthcare settings where hospital staff do not wear appropriate protective equipment, such as masks, gowns, and gloves.

What are the signs and symptoms of Ebola?

The first symptoms are flu-like: headache, fever, aches and pains. In most cases these appear 8-10 days after exposure, though they can appear earlier or later. Vomiting and diarrhoea follow. There may also be a rash, hiccups, red eyes, sore throat, a cough, chest pain, and difficulty breathing or swallowing. Then, in about half the cases, severe haemorrhaging begins.
Symptoms of Ebola typically include:

- Fever (greater than 38.6°C or 101.5°F)
- Severe headache
- Muscle pain
- Weakness
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Abdominal (stomach) pain
- Lack of appetite

Some patients may experience:

- Rash
- Red eyes
- Hiccups
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Difficulty swallowing
- Unexplained bleeding inside and outside of the body

How is Ebola treated and prevented?

There is no cure or vaccine. Doctors treat the illness by balancing the patient's fluids and electrolytes, maintaining blood pressure and oxygen levels, and treating opportunistic infections when they occur.

Once the disease is known to exist in a community, quarantining patients and making sure others don't come in contact with patients' blood or body fluids can prevent it from spreading.

Ebola virus is easily killed by soap, bleach, drying and sunlight. Machine washing clothes that have been contaminated with fluids will destroy Ebola virus. Ebola virus survives only a short time on surfaces that are in the sun or have dried.

- Avoid direct contact with blood or bodily fluids of a patient or a corpse and with objects that could be contaminated;
- Avoid close contact with wild animals and consumption of “bush meat”;
- Avoid having unprotected sexual intercourse;
- Follow strict hand washing routines.

Fruit bats are thought to be Ebola's natural host, and transmission to humans occurs through them or other wild animals. It is thought that humans become infected by handling/butchering contaminated animals.

Risk of Infection with Ebola virus:

Casual contact in public places with people that do not appear to be sick do not transmit Ebola virus. You cannot contract Ebola virus by handling money, groceries or swimming in a pool. Mosquitos do not transmit Ebola Virus.

If you are traveling to the countries affected by Ebola:

The risk of travellers becoming infected or developing Ebola virus is extremely low, unless there has been direct contact with blood or bodily fluids of dead or living infected persons or animals. Contact with bodily fluids includes unprotected sexual contact with infected individual up to seven weeks after this individual has recovered.
- Healthcare workers or Family and friends of patients with Ebola are at particular risk, although practising appropriate infection control should effectively prevent transmission of disease in this setting.

Travellers returning from affected countries should always seek rapid medical attention if they develop flu-like symptoms (such as fever (greater than 38.6°C or 101.5°F), headache, diarrhoea, general malaise etc.) within three weeks after return though they can appear earlier or later, and must remember to mention to their health care provider that they have recently travelled to an affected country.

**If you are arriving from countries currently affected by Ebola**

You must seek medical attention:

- If you develop flu-like symptoms (such as fever (greater than 38.6°C or 101.5°F), headache, diarrhoea or general malaise) within three weeks after return. Although they can appear earlier or later, you should stay at home and immediately telephone NHS on 111 or 999 (if the symptoms are severe). You must remember to tell them that recently you have travelled to a country affected by Ebola Virus.
- These services will provide advice and arrange for you to be seen in a hospital if necessary so the cause of your illness can be determined.
- There are other illnesses that are much more common than Ebola (such as flu, typhoid fever and malaria) that have similar symptoms in the early stages, so proper medical assessment is really important to ensure you get the right diagnosis and treatment.
- It is also really important that medical services are expecting your arrival and calling 111 or 999 will ensure this happens.

**For more information**

You'll find additional information at these trusted websites:

http://nathnac.org/pro/misc/PHE_EBOLA_FACT.pdf
https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice

**References:**

NHS Choices
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
NaTHNaC, England
Travax, NHS Scotland
CDC (centres for Disease Control and Prevention), USA

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