

## Ebola: Factsheet for the general public

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### What is Ebola?

Ebola virus disease, or Ebola haemorrhagic fever as it was previously known, is caused by the Ebola virus. It is a rare but severe disease, found in countries in Africa, which can often have a fatal outcome (for 25-90% of the infected people). Transmission of the viruses occurs from person to person through direct contact with blood and other body fluids. The first documented outbreak of Ebola virus disease occurred in 1976 in the Democratic Republic of Congo, at the time known as Zaire, and all subsequent outbreaks have been in Africa.

### What are the symptoms of Ebola?

In most cases, an infected person experiences sudden onset of fever, weakness, muscle and joint pains and headache, followed by progressive weakness, lack of appetite, diarrhoea (sometimes containing blood and mucus), nausea and vomiting. The initial symptoms are unspecific and are similar to other more common diseases such as the common cold or malaria.

The next stage is more severe with bleeding from the nose, gums and skin, and bloody vomiting and stools. Other symptoms include skin rash, inflamed throat and difficulty swallowing.

It can take between 2 and 21 days from the point of infection for a person to begin to show symptoms.

### How can a person get infected?

A person can get infected with the Ebola virus by direct contact with infected blood, secretions, tissues, organs or other bodily fluids of dead or living infected persons. The virus can also be transmitted through material heavily contaminated with such fluids. It can also be contracted through unprotected sexual contact with patients who have recently recovered from the disease; studies have shown that the virus has been present in semen up to three months after recovery. However, the risk for transmission in general is low in the initial stages of symptomatic patients.

It is transmitted by droplets and not in the air, so it is highly unlikely that someone would be infected with Ebola virus disease just by coming into casual contact with someone already sick, such as sitting next to someone (and without any direct contact of bodily fluids).

Most people are infected from another person but some people have been infected with it from handling dead wild animals or 'bush meat' in Africa, such as chimpanzees and bats.

### How contagious is it?

People only become infectious once they start to have symptoms. The risk of being infected in the early phase of symptomatic patients is generally low. The risk of infection is much higher in the later stages of the disease but can be effectively addressed with the proper use of appropriate personal protective equipment.

### How deadly is it?

The case fatality rate – the proportion of people diagnosed with the disease who die – is 25-90% dependent on the virus type.

### Is the virus resistant?

The Ebola virus is susceptible to disinfectants and bleach and is destroyed by heating.

### Is there a vaccine?

There is no approved vaccine at this point but research is ongoing.

### What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment that is approved for general use against Ebola virus disease but supportive treatment – hospital care to relieve symptoms and to prevent further complications and side effects – can be given.

### Where does it come from?

Ebola viruses are thought to circulate in wild animals in sub-Saharan Africa. They have been found in fruit bats, chimpanzees, gorillas and duikers, and human infections have been linked to direct contact with such animals.

### How can an outbreak be stopped?

An outbreak of Ebola virus disease can be stopped by breaking the chain of transmission. This can be done by isolating suspected and confirmed patients to prevent onward transmission. At the same time, people who have been in close contact with patients are also contacted and monitored to identify possible infections.

### If there is an Ebola outbreak in a country, does it mean that I shouldn't travel there?

Check with your national authorities for travel advice on whether to travel to a country affected by an Ebola outbreak and other health information, including access to healthcare for reasons other than Ebola virus disease.

### How can I protect myself against Ebola infection?

People visiting or residing in affected countries should take the following measures:

- Avoiding contact with symptomatic patients and/or their bodily fluids
- Avoiding contact with corpses and/or bodily fluids from deceased patients
- Avoiding contact with wild animals (including monkeys, forest antelopes, rodents and bats), both alive and dead, and consumption of 'bush meat'
- Washing hands regularly, using soap or antiseptics

### Is there a risk that travellers from affected countries bring Ebola to Europe?

People infected with EVD may arrive in the EU without knowing they have contracted the disease. They may show symptoms while travelling, once reaching their destination or some days later.

The public health authorities in the EU can efficiently detect and confirm cases of Ebola virus disease and thus prevent its onward spread.

The risk of secondary transmission to direct close contacts or in healthcare settings is very low, if prevention measures are implemented.

### When to seek medical attention?

If you develop fever, muscle aches, weakness, headache and sore throat, you have been in a known affected area, having had contact with blood, secretions, organs or other bodily fluids of dead or living infected persons, you should seek rapid medical attention also mentioning your travel history.