



## Frequently Asked Questions on Ebola Virus Disease

### 1. What is Ebola?

Ebola virus disease (formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever) is a severe, often fatal illness, with a death rate of up to 90%. It affects humans and nonhuman primates, that is monkeys, gorillas, and chimpanzees.

### 2. When was Ebola first reported?

Ebola first appeared in 1976 in two simultaneous outbreaks, one in Yambuku village near the Ebola River in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the other in a remote area of what is now South Sudan (Nzara in Western Equatoria).

### 3. Where did the disease originate?

The origin of the virus is unknown but fruit bats (*Pteropodidae*) are considered the likely host of the Ebola virus, based on available evidence.

### 4. How do people get Ebola?

Human beings get Ebola through close contact with the blood, organs or other bodily fluids of infected animals. Infections in Africa have been reported following the handling of infected chimpanzees, gorillas, fruit bats, monkeys, forest antelope and porcupines found ill or dead or in the rainforest.

It is important to reduce contact with high-risk animals (i.e. fruit bats, monkeys or apes) including not picking up dead animals found lying in the forest or handling their raw meat.

Once a person comes into contact with an animal that has Ebola, it can spread quickly within the community from human to human by:

- direct contact (through broken skin or mucous membranes) with the blood, or other bodily fluids or secretions (stool, urine, saliva, semen) of infected people.
- if broken skin or mucous membranes of a healthy person come into contact with environments that have become contaminated with an Ebola patient's infectious fluids such as soiled clothing, bed linen, or used needles.

Health workers often get exposed to the virus when caring for Ebola patients because they are not wearing personal protection equipment, such as gloves, when caring for the patients. The majority of health workers that have contracted the disease were exposed by direct contact with blood, and other body fluids from infected patients or indirectly by touching soiled clothing or linen or contaminated surfaces. Health care providers must strictly follow recommended infection control precautions to avoid getting infected.

Burial ceremonies in which mourners have direct contact with the body of the deceased person, for example through washing of the dead, touching of the body, touching of soiled clothes belonging to the patient, can also play a role in the transmission of Ebola. Persons who have died of Ebola must be handled using strong protective clothing and gloves, and be buried immediately.

People are infectious as long as their blood and secretions contain the virus.

- For this reason, infected patients continue to be closely monitored by medical professionals and will only return home when they receive laboratory tests to ensure the virus is no longer circulating in their systems and they therefore cannot infect anyone else in their communities.
- Men who have recovered from the illness can still spread the virus to their partner through their semen for up to 7 weeks after recovery. They are advised to avoid sexual intercourse

for at least 7 weeks after recovery or to wear condoms if they do have sexual intercourse during 7 weeks after recovery.

### 5. Who is at most risk of contracting Ebola?

Those at most risk of contracting Ebola during outbreaks include:

- Health workers
- Family members and anybody in close contact with infected people
- Mourners who have direct contact with the dead bodies of infected people or their soiled belongings at funerals/burials
- Hunters (or other people) who come into contact with sick or dead animals in the forest

More research needs to be conducted to understand whether some groups of people are more vulnerable to contracting the disease than others e.g. immunosuppressed people.

Exposure to the virus can be controlled if preventive/protective measures are taken in health facilities and communities.

### 6. What are the signs and symptoms?

- Sudden onset of fever, intense weakness, muscle pain, headache and sore throat are typical signs and symptoms.
- This is followed by vomiting, diarrhoea, rash, impaired kidney and liver function, and in some cases, both internal and external bleeding.
- Laboratory findings include low white blood cell and platelet counts, and elevated liver enzymes.
- The incubation period (time interval between infection and symptoms) is from 2 to 21 days. Patients only become contagious when they start to show symptoms.
- Confirmation of Ebola is only done by laboratory diagnosis

### 7. When should somebody seek medical help?

- If a person has been
  - in an area known to have Ebola virus disease or
  - in contact with a person known or suspected to have Ebolaand they begin to have symptoms, they should **seek medical care immediately**.
- Any suspected cases of Ebola should be reported to the nearest health unit straightaway.
- Prompt medical care improves the rate of survival from the disease, and can help to control the spread of the disease, as infection control procedures need to be started immediately.

### 8. Is treatment available for Ebola? What is the treatment?

- Although there is currently no specific treatment to cure the disease, patients are provided intensive supportive care and some recover from the illness. They are frequently dehydrated and need intravenous fluids or oral rehydration with solutions that contain electrolytes.
- To help control further spread of the virus, people that are suspected or confirmed to have the disease must be isolated from other patients and treated by health workers using strict infection control precautions.
- There are some treatment therapies under evaluation; however, they are neither ready nor available for clinical use.

### 9. What can I do to prevent the illness?

- Currently there is no licensed vaccine for Ebola virus disease. Several vaccines are being tested, but none are available for clinical use right now.
- Raising awareness of the risk factors and measures people can take to protect themselves are the only ways to reduce illness and deaths.

You should also do the following:

- Listen to and follow the Ministry of Health directives on Ebola.
- If you suspect someone close to you or in your community of having Ebola virus disease, encourage and support them in seeking appropriate medical treatment in a care facility.
- Report suspected Ebola to the nearest health facility or the Ministry of Health surveillance office.
- Always practice Hand washing with soap and water, particularly after visiting patients in the hospital or caring for someone at home, touching a patient, being in contact with their bodily fluids, or touching his/her surroundings.
- People who have died from Ebola should only be handled using appropriate protective equipment and should be buried immediately. Ebola deaths, if they occur outside a health facility must be reported to the Ministry of Health so that they are handled properly and other infections are prevented.
- Reduce contact with high-risk infected animals (i.e. fruit bats, monkeys, or apes) in the affected rainforest areas. If you suspect an animal is infected, do not handle it.
- Only consume thoroughly cooked animal products (blood and meat).

#### **10. How can healthcare workers protect themselves from Ebola?**

Health workers treating patients with suspected or confirmed illness are at higher risk of infection than other groups of people.

In addition to standard health-care precautions Health workers should:

- Strictly apply recommended infection control measures to avoid exposure to infected blood, fluids, or contaminated environments or objects – such as a patient's soiled linen or used needles.
- Use personal protection equipment such as individual gowns, gloves, masks and goggles or face shields.
- Do not reuse protective equipment or clothing unless they have been properly disinfected.
- Change gloves between caring for each patient suspected of having Ebola.
- Invasive procedures that can expose medical doctors, nurses and others to infection should be carried out under strict, safe conditions.
- Infected patients should be kept separate from other patients and healthy people, as much as possible.

#### **11. I have heard that some herbs and foods can protect against Ebola. Is this true?**

- The Ministry of Health is the source of health advice about Ebola virus disease. WHO recommends that all information on Ebola is sought from MoH.
- While there is no specific drug against Ebola, the best treatment is intensive supportive treatment provided in the hospital by health workers using strict infection control procedures. The infection can be controlled through recommended protective measures.
- Traditional healers or witchdoctors cannot treat Ebola; patients must go to the health facility to get proper care.

#### **12. What is WHO doing about Ebola?**

- Disease surveillance and information- to watch for outbreaks;
- Technical assistance to investigate and contain health threats when they occur – such as on-site help to identify sick people and track disease patterns;
- Advice on prevention and treatment options;
- Deployments of experts and the distribution of health supplies (such as personal protection gear for health workers) in country;
- Communication to raise awareness of the nature of the disease and protective health measures to control transmission of the virus; and
- Activation of regional and global networks of experts to provide assistance, if requested, and

mitigate potential international health effects and disruptions of travel and trade.

### **13. Is it safe to travel? What is WHO's travel advice?**

During an outbreak, WHO reviews the public health situation regularly, and recommends any travel or trade restrictions if necessary. For the time being, WHO is not recommending a travel ban to affected countries. The risk of infection for travelers is very low since person-to-person transmission results from direct contact with the body fluids or secretions of an infected patient.

The WHO Director-General convened the first meeting of the Emergency Committee under the International Health Regulations (2005) [IHR (2005)] regarding the 2014 Ebola Virus Disease (EVD, or "Ebola") outbreak in West Africa on 06 and 07 August 2014. It was the unanimous view of the Committee that the conditions for a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) have been met and issued the following advice:

- There should be no general ban on international travel or trade; restrictions, however, were recommended regarding the travel of EVD cases and contacts as follows:
  - There should be no international travel of Ebola contacts or cases, unless the travel is part of an appropriate medical evacuation. To minimize the risk of international spread of EVD:
    - Confirmed Cases should immediately be isolated and treated in an Ebola Treatment Centre with no national or international travel until 2 Ebola-specific diagnostic tests conducted at least 48 hours apart are negative;
    - Contacts (which do not include properly protected health workers and laboratory staff who have had no unprotected exposure) should be monitored daily, with restricted national travel and no international travel until 21 days after exposure;
    - Probable and suspect cases should immediately be isolated and their travel should be restricted in accordance with their classification as either a confirmed case or contact.
- The Ministry of Health, South Sudan will provide travellers to Ebola affected and at-risk areas with relevant information on risks, measures to minimize those risks, and advice for managing a potential exposure.
- The Ministry of Health, South Sudan is taking steps to be prepared to detect, investigate, and manage Ebola cases; this will include assured access to a qualified diagnostic laboratory for EVD and, where appropriate, the capacity to manage travelers originating from known Ebola-infected areas who arrive at international airports or major land crossing points with unexplained febrile illness.
- The general public is being provided with accurate and relevant information on the Ebola outbreak and measures to reduce the risk of exposure.
- The Government of South Sudan is discouraging the non essential travel of South Sudanese to Ebola affected areas and the non essential travel to South Sudan from Ebola affected areas.

### **General Travel advice**

- Travelers should avoid all contact with infected patients.
- Health workers traveling to affected areas should strictly follow WHO-recommended infection control guidance.
- Anyone who has stayed in areas where cases were recently reported should be aware of the symptoms of infection and seek medical attention at the first sign of illness.
- Clinicians caring for travelers returning from affected areas with compatible symptoms are advised to consider the possibility of Ebola virus disease.