

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers (VHFs)



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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What are viral hemorrhagic fevers?

Viral hemorrhagic fevers (VHFs) refer to a group of illnesses that are caused by several groups of viruses. While some types of hemorrhagic fever viruses can cause relatively mild illnesses, many of these viruses cause severe, life threatening diseases. Viral hemorrhagic fevers include ebola, marburg, lassa fever, dengue fever, and other hemorrhagic diseases. Viral hemorrhagic fevers are very uncommon in the U.S., including Massachusetts. Some of the viruses that cause viral hemorrhagic fevers are considered potential bioterrorist agents.

How are viral hemorrhagic fevers spread?

Transmission varies by virus type. In general, the virus is spread when people come in contact with an infected animal, such as rodents (rats and mice), mosquitoes, and ticks. Some VHFs can also be spread from person to person. This can be done by direct contact with the infected person or their body fluids or in some cases breathing in droplets that have been coughed into the air. Some VHF's can spread through indirect contact with objects contaminated with the virus.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually appear 1 to 21 days after exposure to a virus, and depends on the virus.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms often depend on the virus but can include fever, fatigue, dizziness, muscle aches, loss of strength and exhaustion. In more severe cases symptoms may include bleeding under the skin, in internal organs or from the mouth, eyes or ears. However, patients rarely die due to blood loss. In severely ill patients they may show signs of shock, nervous symptom malfunctions, coma, delirium, and seizures.

How are viral hemorrhagic fevers treated?

Patients receive supportive care, such as fluids and breathing aids, but there is no other treatment or cure for VHF's. Antibiotics have been used with several of the viruses, but their effectiveness is not known.

Is there a vaccine for the viral hemorrhagic fevers?

Yellow fever is the only VHF for which there is a vaccine; no other VHF has a vaccine available.

I am traveling outside of the United States. Should I be concerned about viral hemorrhagic fevers?

In general, your risk of getting sick when traveling depends on the area you visit. Travelers in less economically developed countries are at greater risk than those traveling in developed areas. In most developed countries, such as Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and the European nations, the risk to your health is about the same as that in the United States. In Africa, South and Central America, and the Middle and Far East, standards of sanitation and hygiene vary considerably, and the risk for viral hemorrhagic fevers may be higher. Avoid traveling to areas with known outbreaks of viral hemorrhagic fevers.

General prevention measures for the prevention of many illnesses, including VHF's, when traveling outside the United States include:

- Yellow Fever vaccination if indicated
- Use insect repellent
- Wear proper clothing to cover your skin
- Use bed nets where appropriate
- Avoid rodents and rodent droppings

For more information regarding international travel and viral hemorrhagic fevers, contact the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Travelers Health Office at (877) 394-8747 or through the internet at <http://www.cdc.gov/travel>.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- Your local board of health (listed in the telephone directory under "government")
- The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at (617) 983-6800 or on the MDPH Website at <http://www.state.ma.us/dph/>

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