

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Lassa Fever



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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What is Lassa fever?

Lassa fever is a viral hemorrhagic fever (VHF). VHFs are infectious diseases that interfere with the blood's ability to clot, resulting in excessive bleeding. These types of diseases can also damage walls of blood vessels resulting in internal bleeding. Lassa fever is a viral illness that occurs in west Africa. It is animal-borne, meaning that certain animals carry the disease and can transfer it to humans. Lassa fever is common in parts of west Africa including Sierra Leona, Liberia, Guinea, and Nigeria. It is not found naturally in the U.S. The number of Lassa virus infections per year in west Africa is estimated at 100,000 to 300,000, with about 5,000 deaths.

What are the symptoms of Lassa fever?

Symptoms usually occur 1-3 weeks after an infected person comes into contact with the virus. For majority of infections, symptoms are mild and are not diagnosed. Mild symptoms include slight fever, weakness, and headache. In only about 20% of infected people the disease advances into a more serious illness. More serious symptoms include hemorrhaging (bleeding from the eyes, nose, ears, or internally), extreme difficulty breathing, repeated vomiting, face swelling, pain in the chest, back, and stomach. Some neurological symptoms have also been described, including hearing loss, tremors or shakes, and swelling of the brain. Death may occur within two weeks after symptoms appear due to multi-organ failure. However, only 1% of all Lassa fever infections result in death. Because the symptoms of Lassa fever are so varied and look like multiple other diseases, diagnosis is often difficult.

How is Lassa fever spread?

Lassa fever is naturally carried by a specific type of rodent, called the "multimammate rat". Infected rats spread the virus in their urine (pee). These rats breed frequently, have a large number of young, and are numerous in the savannas and forests of west and central Africa. The multimammate rat also tends to live near human homes and areas where food is stored. All of these factors make it easy for Lassa virus to spread from infected rodents to humans.

Is there any way to prevent and treat Lassa fever?

Avoiding contact with multimammate rodents in areas where outbreaks occur is the best way to avoid getting Lassa fever. If you live in or are visiting these areas, put food away in rodent-proof containers and keep the house clean to discourage rodents from entering and wanting to stay. Using rodents as a food source is not recommended. If someone you know/care for has Lassa fever, have a hospital or doctor treat them. If you must care for them on your own, take preventative measures to avoid contact with the patient's bodily fluids. Wear gloves, masks, goggles, and dressing gowns that are only worn when treating the patient and then removed and disposed of immediately when finished. Sterilize all equipment used for or by the patient.

Treatment for Lassa fever includes using ribavirin, an antiviral drug, which works by stopping the growth of the virus inside the body. Patients should also receive supportive care such as making sure they have plenty of fluids and do not become dehydrated. Making sure blood pressure stays high enough, and treating any complications as they appear.

What is my risk of getting Lassa fever?

In the United States, there is almost no risk of getting Lassa fever. In May 2015, there was a reported case of a man in New Jersey who died of Lassa fever; however he had contracted the disease in Liberia, Africa and died when he returned home. People who are at greatest risk of becoming infected are those who live in or visit areas where Lassa is always present in the community, such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Nigeria. Hospital staff treating people in those regions are not at a large risk of infection as long as protective measures are used.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse, or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/vhf/lassa
- The Burlington County Health Department (609) 265-5548
- The New Jersey Department of Health website at www.nj.gov/health