

Ebola Q&A for Wales

What is Ebola?

Ebola virus disease is a serious, often fatal, disease for which there are no licensed treatments or vaccines. But for people living in countries outside Africa, it continues to be a very low threat.

The current outbreak of the Ebola virus mainly affects three countries in West Africa: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. This is the largest known outbreak of Ebola. Regular updates on the outbreak, including the latest case numbers and numbers of reported deaths, are available from the World Health Organization website at: <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/situation-reports/archive/en/>

What are the symptoms of Ebola?

Symptoms usually appear between two days and 21 days following exposure to the virus. The disease may start suddenly with fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, headache and muscle aches, or other non-specific symptoms. In a later stage, some patients may have profuse internal and external bleeding and multi-organ failure.

Are people in Wales at risk of Ebola?

The overall risk to the people of Wales is low.

Will we see an outbreak of Ebola in Wales or the wider UK?

While we might see cases of imported Ebola, the risk of it spreading to the wider population is very low. Ebola causes most harm in countries with less developed healthcare services.

Are we prepared for Ebola in Wales?

Yes. Public Health Wales is continuing to work with the Welsh Government and the NHS to ensure Wales remains alert to, and prepared for, the risk of Ebola. Public Health Wales is providing training and support to all health boards in Wales to ensure that staffs know how to recognise and treat the illness. Every health board has a clear plan for dealing with any cases that arise.

How is Ebola transmitted?

Ebola is transmitted through direct contact with the blood or bodily fluids of an infected person showing symptoms or through exposure to objects (such as needles) that have recently come into contact with infected blood or bodily fluids.

Can Ebola be transmitted through the air?

There is no evidence indicating that Ebola virus is spread by coughing or sneezing. Ebola virus is transmitted through direct contact with the blood or body fluids of a person who is sick with Ebola; the virus is not transmitted through the air (like measles virus). However, droplets (e.g., splashes or sprays) of respiratory or other secretions from a person who is sick with Ebola could be infectious, and therefore certain precautions (called standard, contact, and droplet precautions) are recommended for use in healthcare settings to prevent the transmission of Ebola virus from patients sick with Ebola to healthcare personnel and other patients or family members.

Can I get Ebola from a person who is infected but doesn't have any symptoms?

No. Individuals who do not have symptoms are not contagious. In order for the virus to be transferred, an individual would have to have direct contact with the blood and/or bodily fluids of an individual who is showing symptoms. Once someone recovers from Ebola, they can no longer spread the virus. However, Ebola virus has been found in semen for up to 3 months. Abstinence from sex (including oral sex) is recommended for at least 3 months. If abstinence is not possible, condoms may help prevent the spread of disease.

Can I get Ebola from contaminated food or water?

No. Ebola is not a water-borne illness. Neither is it a food-borne illness in the sense that it is not recognised as being spread by contaminated food, for example, food bought from a shop. Individuals who are not symptomatic are not contagious. In order for the virus to be transmitted, an individual would have to have direct contact with the blood and/or bodily fluids of an individual who is showing symptoms. However, there is a very small but not negligible risk of illegally imported contaminated bush meat bringing in infection and an even smaller risk of it transmitting disease. Checks for this are in place and any bush meat found will be destroyed. There is no legal trade in this material from the affected parts of Africa or more generally.

Do we need to be concerned about Ebola spreading in the UK or other developed countries?

Given our healthcare system, it is considered very unlikely that we would have widespread cases of Ebola in Wales or wider UK. Our healthcare system has facilities that can effectively manage cases safely with highly trained medical staff who have access to gloves, gowns and personal protective equipment so that spread of Ebola is unlikely. Health services plans are in place to control and contain the virus.

Is there a risk to the public from a person with Ebola coming into Wales?

The risks are low. Affected countries are conducting exit screening (questionnaire and temperature check) of all passengers leaving from major ports to identify those who may have symptoms before they depart. Any passengers who are identified as showing symptoms are not allowed to travel. Arrangements are in place to quickly identify possible cases, treat people appropriately and protect the health of the wider public.

Why are people being screened at airports?

The UK Government has introduced enhanced screening to key UK ports most likely to receive travelers from the affected countries in West Africa. The aim is to facilitate that as many people as possible arriving from the affected countries are aware of the symptoms and how to get access to healthcare services as quickly as possible. Cardiff Airport is the only airport in Wales and does not receive direct flights from the affected countries.

Should I worry about individuals engaged with humanitarian aid work and health care workers returning to Wales from West Africa?

The incubation period for Ebola ranges from two to 21 days and so it is possible that a person infected in West Africa could arrive in Wales before developing symptoms. The guidance for workers returning to Wales is clear. In general, if they return well and without symptoms of illness they return to normal living but remain vigilant for 21 days and are advised to contact the health protection team at Public Health Wales if they become unwell.

Has anyone tested positive for Ebola in Wales?

No.

I know you have tested someone in Wales for Ebola virus. Does this change my risk?

No. Measures are taken at all times to protect the wider public. Often tests are carried out to confirm that an individual definitely does not have Ebola. Even in this situation if a test is carried out the individual will be managed in isolation until the test results are available. There is no risk to the wider public.

If the individual you tested was out and about in Wales does that increase my chance of catching Ebola?

No one has tested positive for Ebola in Wales. Individuals who have no symptoms cannot pass on Ebola. To pass the virus onto somebody else, that person would have to have direct contact with the body fluids of someone showing symptoms. As the person was not infectious there is no risk to anybody who had contact with the individual at this stage.

I'm still worried about contracting Ebola. Should I be on the lookout for symptoms?

You can only catch the disease if you have close contact with someone that has recently traveled to West Africa and contracted Ebola. To date there have been no cases of Ebola infection in Wales or the UK, although one British national has been treated for Ebola in London after falling ill in Sierra Leone.

When should I seek medical attention?

If you have been to a known infected area or cared for a person with Ebola and develop symptoms such as a fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, headache and muscle aches, or other non-specific symptoms within the last 21 days, you should stay at home and seek medical attention immediately by calling NHS Direct Wales on 0845 46 47.

What is the test for Ebola? How and where is it carried out? How long does it take?

The Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens has prepared guidance on the appropriate testing for Ebola. This includes samples to be taken, results turn-around time and other tests that may be conducted to look for alternative causes of illness. In general, a result would be expected within approximately 24 hours of taking a sample.

What is the process a patient will go through from being a possible to a confirmed case?

There are many diseases which have similar symptoms in the early stages so specialist infection clinicians will make expert judgment based on agreed clinical pathways on what the most likely diagnosis is, based on the patient's history.

If Ebola is considered a possibility, then the person would be tested for the disease. A suspect case would be isolated while they are being tested to ensure minimal contact with other people. Healthcare staff treating the patient will wear personal protective equipment (PPE), such as facemasks, visors, gowns and gloves. It is only if this test is positive that the case is considered to be 'confirmed'.

If the test is positive then they will be transferred to a High Level Isolation Unit at the Royal Free Hospital in London. The isolation unit is run by a dedicated team of doctors, nurses and laboratory staff from the Royal Free London infectious diseases service.

Is there a cure for Ebola?

There is currently no cure for Ebola but developments are being made and work is ongoing. At present, there is no specific vaccination or medicine proven to be effective against the disease. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is working with experts and pharmaceutical companies to develop a safe, effective vaccine but it may be some time before this is available. In some cases, experimental drugs have been used, but the main treatment for severely ill patients who require intensive supportive care is rehydration with intravenous fluids. Antibiotics are not effective against Ebola.

Can animals contract and spread Ebola?

Ebola is principally a disease of humans and monkeys. Human to human contact poses the greatest risk of the disease spreading. Movement of infected people is the most likely route for infection to reach the UK.

There is very limited evidence of domestic animals and livestock becoming infected and no evidence at present of them passing on infection in the natural setting. Even so, there are plans being developed to manage instances where any animals might have been exposed should that become necessary.

There is a very small but not negligible risk of illegally imported contaminated bush meat bringing in infection and an even smaller risk of it transmitting disease. Checks for this are in place and any bush meat found will be destroyed. There is no legal trade in this material from the affected parts of Africa or more generally.

Suggested links:

Public Health Wales - <https://www.publichealthwales.org/ebola>

European Centre for Disease Control -

http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/healthtopics/ebola_marburg_febv/factsheet_general_public/Pages/factsheet-general-public.aspx

Public Health England – <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ebola-public-health-questions-and-answers>

Centers for Disease Control - <http://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/>

Health Protection Scotland -

<http://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/travel/publicationsdetail.aspx?id=60886>

NHS Direct Wales -

<http://www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/encyclopaedia/e/article/ebolavirusdisease/>

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has also reviewed current knowledge on Ebola virus and has issued a technical information sheet discussing the virus and the disease. The information sheet is available at:

http://www.oie.int/fileadmin/Home/fr/Media_Center/docs/pdf/Ebola_fact_sheet_EN_Final.pdf