

Briefing on Ebola - October 2014

Context

- Ebola is a viral haemorrhagic fever which is often fatal.
- Symptoms may include fever, chills, muscle aches, headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, sore throat or rash. Ebola can result in uncontrolled bleeding, causing damage to the patient's vital organs.
- Ebola has previously caused sporadic outbreaks in several African countries. The current outbreak has primarily affected 3 countries in West Africa: Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.
- There have been a total of 8,399 cases of Ebola, including 4,033 deaths in the affected countries, according to recent World Health Organization (WHO) statistics.

Transmission of Ebola

- Ebola is not an airborne infection and so the risk from coughing or sneezing is low. It spreads through direct contact with body fluids (e.g. blood, urine, faeces, vomit and possibly saliva).
- Most human infections result from direct contact with the body fluids of ill patients (particularly in hospitals) or as a result of unsafe burial procedures, use of contaminated medical devices (including needles and syringes) and unprotected exposure to contaminated bodily fluids.
- An individual may be infected with Ebola but not become unwell until 2 to 21 days later (incubation period).
- People with Ebola are **not infectious before they become unwell**. It can only be passed on once someone has started to experience symptoms (such as fever).

Is there a risk in the UK?

- The overall risk of Ebola and a threat of an outbreak in the UK remains low.
- Even if a case is identified here, the UK has robust, well-developed and well-tested NHS systems for managing infectious diseases.
- A national exercise to test preparedness for an Ebola case in the UK was organised on 11th October 2014.
- Britain has had only one case of Ebola in the UK in a repatriated health worker, with the patient making a full recovery and with no transmission of infection to workers caring for them.
- There have only been three cases where infection occurred outside of Africa – in the United States and Spain.

Efforts to control the situation globally and in the UK

- PHE continues to work with government colleagues, the WHO and a wide range of partners including UNICEF and Médecins Sans Frontières to provide support to the affected countries.
- PHE continues to keep border staff and medical practitioners informed, and request they remain vigilant for unexplained illness in those who have visited these areas in West Africa.
- Public Health England (PHE) has provided healthcare workers with the latest information about the outbreak and actions to take in the event of a possible case: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ebola-virus-disease-clinical-management-and-guidance>.
- Exit screening at airports in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea has been in place for some weeks to ensure all passengers leaving affected countries are checked for symptoms.
- Entry screening was recently initiated at London's Heathrow and Gatwick airports and Eurostar terminals. This involves assessing passengers' recent travel history and who they have been in contact with as well as a possible medical assessment, conducted by trained medical personnel. Passengers are given advice on what to do should they develop symptoms later.
- At present, the Foreign Office advises against any but essential travel to Liberia, Guinea or Sierra Leone, though WHO have said that no general travel bans should be imposed.
- Staff members should be reminded to check for up-to-date advice **before** travel to affected areas – from the Travel Health Network and Centre (NaTHNaC) at <http://www.nathnac.org/travel/> and the Foreign Office at <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>
- Guidance for professionals working in educational, childcare or young persons' settings is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ebola-advice-and-risk-assessment-for-educational-childcare-and-young-persons-settings>
- Robust arrangements have been set up to monitor health care and other aid workers returning from deployment in affected countries through their local Health protection teams on return to the UK.

For further information, please visit the following website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/ebola-government-response>

Contact: Aslam Baig, Public Health Principal, aslam.baig@richmond.gov.uk, 020 8734 3435