

Information about Ebola

23 October 2014

Ebola (or Ebola virus disease, EVD) is a very serious disease that can be fatal. It is mainly found in tropical Central and West Africa.

Confirmed and suspected cases from an Ebola outbreak in West Africa continue to be reported in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

It is very unlikely that anyone with Ebola will arrive in New Zealand and extremely unlikely that Ebola would spread within New Zealand. The Ministry of Health assessment is that the risk to New Zealand from Ebola remains low, and health and border authorities are well prepared.

Low risk of catching Ebola

It's very unlikely that someone with Ebola will arrive in New Zealand. This is because:

- the current outbreak is mainly affecting three countries in West Africa (Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia), and even in these countries the disease is not common
- there are very few people who travel from Ebola-affected countries to New Zealand, and very few people who travel from New Zealand to those countries.

Ebola is not easy to catch – it is not spread through the air and is not as infectious as the flu or measles. You can't catch Ebola just by sitting next to an infected person – it requires contact with infected body fluids (such as blood, saliva, urine or faeces) through broken skin or mucous membranes (such as the mouth or eyes).

Screening and monitoring at the border

The Ministry of Health and New Zealand Customs are screening people who have recently been in Ebola-affected countries in West Africa. Travellers from the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is experiencing a separate and localised outbreak, are also being screened.

Travellers arriving in New Zealand declare on their Arrival Cards the countries they have visited in the past 30 days, and Customs runs electronic pre-screening.

A traveller who has visited an Ebola-affected country and/or Democratic Republic of Congo – will be asked a series of questions by Customs officers. Passengers who require further assessment will be seen by a border health protection officer. All passengers who have recently visited countries affected by the Ebola outbreak are given advice about what to do if they become unwell.

Staff at all airports are trained and ready to respond to any reports of ill travellers, and New Zealand's public health system is well prepared to respond and assist.

Assessment processes are in place

Anyone who feels unwell after recently travelling overseas should phone Healthline on 0800 611 116, their GP or nurse, and say where they have been travelling.

If a person arrives at a health clinic (GP) or hospital, they will be assessed and asked about recent overseas travel. The chances of someone having Ebola are very low.

If they fit the criteria for a suspected case of Ebola, the health clinic or hospital will notify the local Medical Officer of Health and the Ministry of Health. Notification of a suspected case will trigger contact tracing and follow up by public health officers.

Testing for Ebola will be carried out by a laboratory in Australia. It will take up to 72 hours for test results to be known.

Hospitals have staff who know how to use personal protective equipment (PPE) as part of routine infection prevention and control standards for managing such diseases. Hospitals are reinforcing these protocols and ensuring staff are trained.

Signs and symptoms of Ebola

Signs and symptoms of Ebola appear between 2 and 21 days after infection (usually between 8 and 10 days). Early signs and symptoms include sudden onset of fever ($>38.5^{\circ}\text{C}$), weakness, muscle and joint pains and headache. The initial symptoms are similar to other more common diseases such as the common cold, the flu or malaria. People with Ebola are not infectious before symptoms appear.

As the disease progresses, symptoms can include bleeding from the nose, gums and bruising, diarrhoea (may be bloody), skin rash, sore throat and difficulty swallowing.

When to seek medical attention

If you have been in an Ebola-affected country in the past 21 days, and you develop fever or other symptoms of Ebola, phone your GP, nurse or Healthline on 0800 611 116 and say where you have been travelling. If you develop fever or other symptoms of Ebola, phone your GP, nurse or Healthline on 0800 611 116 and say where you have been travelling.

Treatment

While there are currently trials of possible vaccines for Ebola, at this stage there are no specific vaccines or medicines (such as anti-viral drugs) that are proven to be effective. Early supportive treatment in hospital to relieve symptoms and prevent further complications can improve recovery from Ebola.

Travelling to Ebola-affected countries

The Ministry of Health strongly advises people to reconsider their need to travel to affected countries. If people need to travel, make sure you:

- register details with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade
- stay updated on changes to the situation
- ensure health insurance for illness and/or repatriation is covered if you become unwell for any reason.

For more information about Ebola see www.health.govt.nz/ebola