

Lassa Fever

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Lassa fever?

Lassa fever is a viral hemorrhagic illness caused by a virus that is found in West Africa. It was first discovered in 1969 in Lassa, Nigeria. Lassa fever is mainly found in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Nigeria and is spread by rats. Other neighboring countries in Africa are also at risk because the type of rat that spreads the virus is also found throughout the West African region.

How do people get Lassa fever?

Lassa fever is caused by infection with the Lassa virus. The virus is spread by a rat that lives in large numbers in west, central, and east Africa. The rats carry the virus in their urine and droppings and live in homes and areas where food is stored. People can get Lassa fever through contact with the urine or droppings of an infected rat, catching and preparing infected rats as food, inhaling tiny particles in the air contaminated with infected rat urine or droppings, and rarely, through direct contact with a sick person's blood or body fluids, through mucous membranes, like the eyes, nose, or mouth.

What is the risk of getting Lassa fever in the United States?

To date, there have only been six cases of Lassa fever in the United States and all have been associated with travel to countries known to have the virus. The risk of getting Lassa fever in the United States from someone who has traveled to West Africa is extremely low. People at greatest risk of getting Lassa fever are those who live in or visit Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Nigeria and have been exposed to rats.

Can Lassa fever spread from one person to another?

A person can get Lassa fever from another person who is infected **and** showing symptoms of the disease. Lassa fever is spread through direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected, person that is showing symptoms of the disease. People with Lassa fever are not believed to be contagious before they have symptoms. Casual contact (including skin-to-skin contact without exchange of body fluids) does not spread Lassa fever. It is also spread through exposure to objects (such as needles) that have been contaminated with infected body fluids. Lassa fever is not spread through the air and is not spread through casual contact like hugging, shaking hands, or sitting near someone.

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

No. People who do not have symptoms are not contagious.

How is Lassa fever different than Ebola?

Although Lassa fever and Ebola can result in similar symptoms, Lassa fever is less likely than Ebola to spread from person to person and is far less deadly. The death rate from Lassa fever is approximately 1%, whereas the death rate from Ebola is approximately 70%. While both diseases are viral hemorrhagic fevers, bleeding and severe symptoms are not common in cases of Lassa fever.

What are the symptoms of Lassa fever?

Symptoms of Lassa fever include:

- Fever
- Weakness
- Feeling tired
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache

Some people may have more serious symptoms:

- Signs of bleeding (for example in the gums, eyes, nose)
- Difficulty breathing
- Vomiting, swelling of the face
- Pain in the chest, back and abdomen
- Shock
- Hearing loss
- Shaking
- Inflammation of the brain

Symptoms can appear anywhere from one to three weeks after the patient comes in contact with the virus. Most people who are infected have mild symptoms.

How is Lassa fever diagnosed?

If a person has the early symptoms of Lassa fever, and there is reason to believe that Lassa fever should be considered, the patient should be isolated at a hospital, and public health professionals should be notified. The NJ Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will work with doctors to determine whether testing for Lassa fever is needed.

What is the treatment for people with Lassa fever?

An antiviral drug called ribavirin has been used with some success in Lassa fever patients. People with Lassa fever will receive medical care such as fluids, oxygen, blood transfusions, and any other medicines as needed. Early treatment is best.

If I go to West Africa, how can I prevent Lassa fever?

If you travel to West Africa, the best way to prevent Lassa fever is to avoid rats. You can also:

- Put food away in rat-proof containers.
- Keep the home clean to discourage rat from entering homes.
- Avoid using rats as a food source.
- Trap rats in and around homes to reduce rat population.

Where can I get more information on Lassa fever?

- Your healthcare provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health Website: www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/vhf.shtml
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention Website: www.cdc.gov/vhf/lassa/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.