The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared that the Ebola virus disease (EVD) outbreak in West Africa fits the criteria under International Health Regulations (IHR) of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). This declaration has triggered a WHO internationally-coordinated response to countries with cases in order to assist them to take measures to contain and control the outbreak.

This is the first outbreak of EVD in West Africa and it is unprecedented in size and geographical distribution, affecting densely populated urban areas.

Cases have been mostly concentrated in three countries in West Africa – Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. To date there have been no reported cases in the UK.

Ebola virus disease (EVD), formerly known as Ebola haemorrhagic fever, is a rare but severe disease caused by the Ebola virus.

The present outbreak of EVD in West Africa has highlighted the need for travellers to infected countries to ensure that they have taken all the necessary travel health precautions.

The Ebola virus is transmitted to people through direct contact with blood or body fluids of symptomatic people or animals, or infected objects. Ebola virus does not transmit through the air as influenza does.

The incubation period for EVD, i.e. the time interval from infection with the virus to onset of symptoms, varies from two to 21 days.

Symptoms include fever, weakness, muscle pain, headache and sore throat. This is followed by vomiting, diarrhoea, rash, and in some cases, bleeding. There is no licensed vaccine.

**Implications for Northern Ireland**

There is no change to the current risk assessment, in that the risk to the public in Northern Ireland is very low. The likelihood of an individual contracting EVD is
extremely low unless they have been exposed directly to blood or body fluids of symptomatic people or animals, or infected objects.

There is a potential risk for volunteers and healthcare staff working in affected countries, especially if involved in caring for EVD patients. However, if the basic precautions that would apply in all humanitarian situations are applied and the general principles of infection control are adhered to, the risk can be minimised.

The PHA is working with partner HSC organisations to ensure we have appropriate systems in place in the unlikely event that a case presents in Northern Ireland.

**Advice to travellers**

Several thousand cases of EVD in humans have been identified in recent months in West Africa and the outbreak is still evolving. There have been no reported cases in the UK.

For the latest information, please see Public Health England's updates [here](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone).

The UK government travel advice to the main countries affected is here:

- [www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/sierra-leone)
- [www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/guinea](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/guinea)
- [www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/liberia](https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/liberia)

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises against all but essential travel to Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia, except for those involved in the direct response to the Ebola outbreak.

The likelihood of contracting EVD is extremely low unless you have been exposed directly to blood or body fluids of symptomatic people or animals, or infected objects. Therefore the risk to the public in Northern Ireland is low.

If you have travelled and stayed in the areas where EVD cases have been recently reported, and you become ill within 21 days of returning home (fever, headache, achiness, sore throat, diarrhoea, vomiting, stomach pain, rash, or red eyes), seek medical attention as soon as possible and mention your travel history.

The risk of infection for travellers visiting the affected countries is considered low. However, the Public Health Agency (PHA) advises that travellers to affected
countries need to be familiar with how EVD virus is transmitted. Travellers are advised to avoid all types of contact which could put them at risk of contracting the virus. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) travel and transport risk assessment on EVD is available here: www.who.int/ith/updates/20140421/en

The latest European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control epidemiological updates, which include EVD, are available here: www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/press/epidemiological_updates/Pages/epidemiological_updates.aspx

**Healthcare workers and volunteers**

There is a risk for healthcare workers and volunteers working in affected countries, especially if involved in caring for EVD patients. However, if the recommended level of precaution for such settings is implemented, transmission of the disease should be prevented. The risk level can be considered very low to low unless these precautions are not followed, e.g. no personal protective equipment, needle stick injury, etc. Avoid all contact with blood and body fluids of infected people or animals. Do not handle items that may have come in contact with an infected person’s blood or body fluids.


**General travel advice**

In general, the PHA advises all travellers to make themselves aware of the health risks associated with the countries they plan to visit. All travellers need to prepare for their trip well in advance by understanding the risks, getting any recommended vaccinations and adhering to other country-specific precautions that are advised. In this way their health will be better protected and the risk of acquiring disease minimised. WHO international travel advice and health general precautions are available here: www.who.int/ith/precautions/en

Although the medical profession and the travel industry can provide extensive help and sound advice, it remains the traveller’s responsibility to seek information, understand any risks involved and take necessary precautions to protect their health while travelling.
Information for health professionals on the guidance of viral haemorrhagic fevers

Specialist guidance on the management (including infection control) of patients with viral haemorrhagic fever (VHF) is available here:

NI HSC Patient Care Pathway V 25 2 15.pdf

Latest news

10 November 2014 - Public Health Agency statement – Ebola

09 November 2014 - PHA statement regarding EVD test

23 October 2014 - Exercise tests preparedness for Ebola in Northern Ireland

08 October 2014 - Ebola planning continues in Northern Ireland

Further information

Ebola QA NI.pdf

PHE Ebola outbreak map

Print