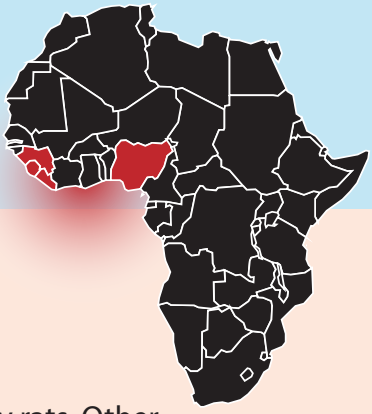
What you need to know about Lassa Fever



Lassa fever is caused by a virus that is found in West Africa. It was first discovered in 1969 in Lassa, Nigeria when two missionary nurses died.

Lassa fever is mainly found in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Nigeria and is spread by rats. Other neighboring countries are also at risk because the type of rat that spreads the virus is also found throughout the West African region.

100,000 to 300,000 Estimated number of Lassa fever cases in West Africa each year

5,000 Estimated number of deaths

Lassa fever is different from Ebola

Lassa fever is different from Ebola, the disease that is responsible for the current outbreak in West Africa. 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% versus approximately 70% from Ebola. While both diseases are viral hemorrhagic fevers, bleeding and severe symptoms are not common in cases of Lassa fever.

70% Death rate from Ebola

1% Death rate from Lassa fever

Lassa fever is spread by a type of rat in West Africa

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. They 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

RARELY, direct contact with a sick person's blood or body fluids, through mucous membranes, like eyes, nose, or mouth

People with Lassa fever are not believed to be contagious before they have symptoms. Lassa fever is not spread through casual contact (like hugging, shaking hands, or sitting near someone).

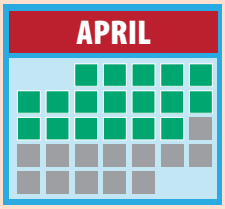
CS257280 June 2, 2015

The risk of getting Lassa fever in the United States is extremely low

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.

Number of cases in U.S., to date

Signs and symptoms of Lassa fever are usually mild



Signs and symptoms of Lassa fever typically occur

1 to 3 weeks

after a person is infected.

- Most people who are infected have mild symptoms and so go undiagnosed. Mild symptoms include slight fever, feeling tired and weak, and headache.
- In some people, the disease may cause more serious symptoms like bleeding; difficulty breathing; vomiting; facial swelling; pain in the chest, back, and abdomen; and shock.

Only an estimated 1% of all Lassa fever cases result in death.

Lassa fever can be treated

If a healthcare worker suspects Lassa fever in a patient, a laboratory test can diagnose the disease. Ribavirin, an antiviral drug, has been used to successfully treat patients with Lassa fever. It is most effective when given soon after a patient becomes sick. Patients should also receive supportive care, including maintaining their hydration, oxygen levels, and blood pressure, and treatment of any other complicating infections.

If you go to West Africa, prevent Lassa fever by keeping away from rats.

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 and keep the home clean to discourage rat from entering homes.
- Avoid using these rats as a food source.
- Trap rats in and around homes to reduce rat population.

Remember, the risk of getting Lassa fever in the United States from someone who traveled to West Africa is extremely low. You can't get Lassa fever through casual contact.