
Ebola: The Facts for Head Start Programs

For parents and guardians of the more than one million children from birth to age five who receive comprehensive services each day through Head Start and Early Head Start programs, as well as for Head Start program staff members, the recent reports of patients with Ebola Virus Disease in the United States can be understandably concerning. Head Start and Early Head Start programs are encouraged to use this fact sheet to answer questions staff may have and support staff, children, and families.

What is Ebola?

Ebola is a serious illness caused by the Ebola virus. Ebola symptoms include fever, severe headache, muscle pain, vomiting, diarrhea, stomach pain, and/or unexplained bleeding or bruising. Symptoms may appear anywhere from 2 to 21 days after exposure, although 8 to 10 days is most common.

How is Ebola Spread?

Ebola virus is spread through direct contact with the blood or body fluids (including but not limited to feces, saliva, sweat, urine, vomit, breast milk, and semen) of a person who is sick with Ebola. The virus in blood and body fluids can enter another person's body through broken skin or through the eyes, nose, or mouth.

- **Ebola virus is not spread through air or by water, or by any food grown or approved for consumption in the United States.**
- **A person who has been exposed to Ebola but does not have symptoms is not infectious.**

Who is at Risk?

Health workers and the family and friends in close contact with Ebola patients are at highest risk because they may come in contact with the blood or body fluids of sick patients, for example, by changing sheets after an ill person has vomited.

Children are at greater risk from seasonal influenza (flu) than they are from the Ebola virus.

What Can Head Start and Early Head Start Programs Do to Help?

Prevention: Head Start and Early Head Start teachers and staff should continue to use good infection control practices. The same steps that prevent the spread of many other diseases help to prevent Ebola transmission.

Frequent hand washing and proper cleaning of soiled bedding, toys, and surfaces such as countertops, doorknobs, sinks, and toilets, are key to reducing or preventing the transmission of communicable diseases, such as flu, hepatitis, and Enterovirus-D68.

Programs should separate soiled bedding from cribs, mats, cradles, or cots from other used laundry to avoid contamination. Soiled bedding should be washed separately using regular "hot" or "cold" washing cycles and regular drying cycles.

Program staff should wear gloves in cases where they may come into contact with blood or body fluids (e.g., treating a scrape or changing a diaper), and these gloves should be removed and disposed of properly to avoid contact. After removing gloves, staff should wash their hands again.

Head Start and Early Head Start program staff should follow their standard protocols for dealing with sick children. There is no expectation for Head Start and Early Head Start programs to diagnose children based on suspected symptoms.

Early care and education providers are encouraged to use the standards from [Caring for Our Children](#). Please share the information with families to help prevent the spread of contagious illnesses, in general. Programs can also help by providing prevention information to Head Start families. Attached to this guidance is a tip sheet that can be shared with parents.

Support Program Staff: In the unlikely case that a Head Start or Early Head Start employee has contact with an Ebola patient, these employees may be asked by public health authorities to remain at home for up to 21 days. Programs should review their Continuity of Operations Plans and staffing plans to ensure adequate coverage, if needed.

Reduce Stigma: Stigma can occur when people associate an infectious disease with a population, even though not everyone in that population or from that region is specifically at risk for the disease. Children and families that have connections to West Africa may experience stigma from their communities. This stigma may also extend to individuals that have recently traveled to West Africa and/or to individuals that have had contact with an Ebola patient, or who live in an apartment building or neighborhood where Ebola cases have occurred.

Head Start programs should stress that Ebola is caused by a virus – not a person – and that the virus is difficult to transmit (i.e., it is not airborne). They should also be cautious of the images and messages that they share in order to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes.

Head Start programs that serve families with ties to West Africa can be helpful as a source of support and community connection. All people who have traveled to an affected country or may have had exposure to an Ebola patient should be undergoing monitoring with support of their local public health department. Head Start programs can support families undergoing monitoring and encourage them to call the local health department if they begin showing any symptoms, such as an elevated fever.

In the unlikely case that a child or staff member is asked by public health authorities to remain at home, programs should stress that if individuals do not develop Ebola symptoms during the 21-day monitoring period, they do not have Ebola and pose no risk when they return afterwards.

Reduce Children's Fears: Even young children may be exposed to media reports or overhear adults discussing Ebola. These steps may help Head Start staff support children's coping with Ebola-related fears:

- Be cautious about discussing Ebola where children may overhear. Limit children's exposure to media reports on the disease.
- If children have questions, make time to listen to their concerns and answer their questions.
- Be honest. Answer questions based on the facts.
- Speak in a calm tone of voice. Use reassuring words. Reinforce that parents, Head Start staff, and other adults in the child's life work together to keep children healthy.
- Keep all explanations age-appropriate.
- Be clear about the differences between images they may have seen of West African countries and the situation in the United States.
- Reinforce hand washing and other disease prevention steps that children can take themselves. Good hygiene steps are not only beneficial for children's health, they also help children feel empowered and able to make a difference.

[Support is Available for You, Too](#)

Program staff and parents may feel stress or worry associated with Ebola, especially if there are cases identified in their communities. Immediate crisis counseling to people concerned about Ebola virus reports is available through the Disaster Distress Helpline (1-800-985-5990). The helpline can also be accessed at

<http://disasterdistress.samhsa.gov/> and TTY for Deaf individuals: 1-800-846-8517. [Tips on Coping with Stress during Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#) are also available online.

Where Can I Learn More?

- For more information on Ebola, consult your state or local public health agency or the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) Ebola page.
- The Administration for Children and Families provides additional resources on [helping Head Start programs prepare for communicable disease outbreaks or natural disasters](#).
- Health resources for Head Start grantees is available from the [National Center on Health](#).
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has additional [Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers on talking with children about infectious disease outbreaks](#).