

# What Head Start Programs Should Know About Ebola

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## What Is Ebola?

Ebola is a rare disease that causes serious illness and can be fatal. It is caused by an *Ebolavirus* found in several African countries. However, outbreaks have been sporadic. Recovery from Ebola depends on good supportive clinical care and a person's immune response. People who recover from Ebola infection develop antibodies that last for at least 10 years.

## What Are the Signs of Ebola?

Ebola is a serious illness caused by the Ebola virus.

Symptoms include:

- Fever
- Severe headache
- Muscle pain
- Vomiting, diarrhea, or stomach pain
- Unexplained bleeding or bruising

Symptoms may appear anywhere from two to 21 days after coming in contact with someone infected with Ebola. Symptoms commonly appear after eight to 10 days.

## How Does Ebola Spread?

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

It is important to know that:

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

## Who Is at Risk?

Anyone who comes in contact with the blood or body fluids of a person sick with Ebola is at highest risk for infection.

In the U.S., children are at greater risk of catching seasonal flu than they are the Ebola virus. Unless a child has had direct contact with the blood or body fluids of someone who is sick with Ebola, most children are not at risk.

## How Is Ebola Diagnosed?

If you suspect a child in your program has Ebola, you should ask the parent to take the child see his or her doctor.

## How to Talk to Children about Ebola?

- Be honest. Answer questions based on the facts.
- Speak in a calm tone of voice and use reassuring words. Reinforce that parents, staff, and other adults in the child's life are working together to keep everyone healthy.
- Be clear about the differences between images they may have seen of West African countries and the situation in the United States.
- Reduce any stigma by stressing that Ebola is caused by a virus, not a person, and that the virus is difficult to transmit (i.e., it is not airborne).
- Remind children to wash their hands. Good hand washing is not only beneficial for a child's health, but it can also help the child feel able to make a difference.

## Implications for Head Start Programs

- All children and staff should be screened for Ebola if there has been an exposure within the center.
- It is recommended that children and staff infected with Ebola only be excluded from the Head Start center until treatment is started and the doctor determines the child or staff member is no longer infectious.
- In the unlikely case that a staff or volunteer has had contact with person sick with Ebola, he or she may be asked by public health authorities to remain at home for up to 21 days. Programs should review their emergency plans and staffing availability to ensure adequate coverage, if needed.
- Staff absences may represent the primary challenge to most Head Start programs. Absences may be related to staff illness or may be caused by worried employees who fear exposure to Ebola in the workplace.

## How Can Programs Limit the Spread of Ebola?

Once a case of Ebola is identified within a center, the child or adult should be excluded for further testing and medical treatment, if necessary.

- Programs should separate soiled bedding from cribs, mats, cradles, or cots from other used laundry to avoid contamination. Soiled bedding should be washed separately on "hot" or "cold" washing cycles and regular drying cycles.
- Infected areas should be washed with mild soap and running water or with an approved sanitizer.

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- Make sure all children and adults use good handwashing techniques, including scrubbing with soap or alcohol-based gels (hand sanitizer). Soap and water is preferred if hands are visibly soiled.
- If you have recently traveled to West Africa or may have been exposed to someone sick with Ebola, be sure to follow your local public health agency's instructions.

## Where Can I Learn More?

- Immediate crisis counseling is available to people concerned about Ebola through the Disaster Distress Helpline at (toll-free) 1-800-985-5990 or [SAMHSA Disaster Distress Helpline](#)
- Watch [Managing Infectious Disease in Head Start](#)
- Check out [Talking with Children: Tips for Caregivers, Parents, and Teachers during Infectious Disease Outbreaks](#)
- Find resources to help early childhood programs prepare for [communicable disease outbreaks or natural disasters](#)