

# VIRAL HEMORRHAGIC FEVERS

## Polk County Preparations

Because of ongoing concerns about potential terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is working to improve overall preparation against terrorism. One aspect of preparation is to learn more about protecting ourselves against possible attacks with biological agents.

If a public health emergency happens in our community, the Polk County Public Health Department will be the local agency responsible for preparing and guiding medical response and public information efforts. During such an emergency, a critical role of the Public Health Department will be to work with other local first responders, such as fire and police. The Public Health Department will also coordinate response activities with state and federal agencies.

The Polk County Public Health Department is providing this information to help you understand what viral hemorrhagic fevers are and what response you may be asked to take in the unlikely event that you would be exposed to a viral hemorrhagic fever.

## What are Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers?

Viral hemorrhagic fevers (VHFs) are highly contagious diseases caused by viruses that can live in hosts such as rats and mice as well as in mosquitoes and ticks. Under natural conditions, these diseases are relatively rare in the United States. There are a number of distinct viruses that cause hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola, Lassa and Marburg.

Viral hemorrhagic fevers generally occur in people living in or visiting areas with infected hosts. Most people get VHFs by being bitten by a mosquito or tick, or through direct contact with an infected rodent's urine or feces. Some viral hemorrhagic fevers are spread from person to person through close contact with an infected person's body fluids such as saliva, blood, urine or semen.

## Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers and Bioterrorism

Many viral hemorrhagic fevers are considered possible bioterrorism agents because they are highly infectious, can be spread through the air as an aerosol or spray and would cause serious illness and fear in the population.

In the event of a bioterrorist attack with VHFs, the Public Health Department and emergency officials will provide emergency information and instructions on how to protect yourself and your family. You may be asked to evacuate (leave the area) or shelter-in-place (remain inside a building). In either case, it is important that you and your family have an Emergency Preparation Plan.

## Symptoms of Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers

The most common symptoms of VHFs include fever, exhaustion, dizziness, muscle aches, weakness and prostration. Other symptoms include signs of bleeding ranging from redness of the eyes, lowered blood pressure and flushing, to bleeding from mouth, eyes or ears. If you were exposed to VHFs, you could experience shock, nervous system malfunction, coma, delirium, seizures and death. The symptoms may appear anywhere from 2 to 21 days after exposure, depending on the type of viral hemorrhagic fever.

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## Treatment for Viral Hemorrhagic Fevers

No vaccines exist to prevent viral hemorrhagic fevers except for yellow fever. At this time, the yellow fever vaccine is recommended only for individuals traveling to areas such as tropical South America and sub-Saharan Africa.

If you were exposed to VHF, you would be provided supportive medical care for relief of symptoms. Certain antiviral medications have been effective in treating specific types of viral hemorrhagic fevers.

The best way to prevent viral hemorrhagic fevers is to avoid contact with infected rodents, mosquitoes or ticks. The spread from person-to-person can be reduced through proper infection control techniques, including hand washing and proper use of masks, gowns and gloves.

If you have any questions about viral hemorrhagic fevers, please contact the **Polk County Health Department at 515-286-3798**. Public Health Department staff members are available to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information about putting together an Emergency Preparation Plan, visit the Department of Homeland Security site at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov). Also, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at [www.bt.cdc.gov](http://www.bt.cdc.gov) for additional information.

