



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

**Boston Public Health Commission
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Viral Hemorrhagic Fever (VHF)

What are viral hemorrhagic fevers?

VHF refers to a group of illnesses that are caused by several distinct groups of viruses. While some types of hemorrhagic fever viruses cause relatively mild illness, many of these viruses cause severe, life-threatening disease.

How are viral hemorrhagic fevers spread?

These viruses are most often found in animals or insects and are spread to people when they come into direct contact with the infected animal/insect, or their urine, fecal matter, saliva, or other bodily fluids. With many of these viruses, the disease can be spread person to person either by direct contact with the infected person, or their body fluids, or in some cases by breathing in droplets that have been coughed into the air. With some VHF, the spread can occur indirectly through contact with objects contaminated with infected body fluids.

Because some VHF's can be spread through the air, they may have the potential to be used as a bioterrorist agent.

What are the symptoms?

Specific signs and symptoms vary by the type of VHF, but initial signs and symptoms often include fever, fatigue, dizziness, muscle aches, loss of strength, and exhaustion. Patients with severe cases of VHF often show signs of bleeding under the skin, in internal organs, or from body orifices like the mouth, eyes, or ears. Although blood loss may occur in many sites around the body, patients rarely die as a result. Severely ill patients may also experience shock, nervous system malfunction, coma, delirium, and seizures. Some types of VHF are associated with renal (kidney) failure.

How long does it take for symptoms to appear?

The length of time it takes for symptoms to appear will vary depending on the type of virus a person is exposed to. It can be anywhere from 4 to 21 days. However, with many of the viruses, symptoms will appear within 2 weeks. In Massachusetts, all cases of suspected VHF are required to be reported immediately to local health departments.

How are VHF treated?

Patients receive supportive therapy such as fluids and pain management, but in general, there is no other treatment for most VHF. Antiviral drugs have been effective in treating some types of VHF but this is the exception not the rule.

Are there vaccines for VHF?

With the exception of yellow fever, no vaccines are available to protect against these diseases.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
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