

Guinea's Ebola battle: steps taken to contain virus

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The Ebola virus plaguing Guinea is one of the deadliest known to man, claiming the lives of two-thirds of the people it has infected so far.

The tropical [virus](#) can fell its victims within days, causing severe fever and muscle pain, weakness, vomiting and diarrhoea—in some cases shutting down organs and causing unstoppable bleeding.

Of around 1,850 people diagnosed with Ebola haemorrhagic fever since the virus was first identified 38 years ago in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire), 1,200 have died, the UN health agency says.

Of 86 cases in Guinea there have been 59 deaths in the southern forest region of the west African nation bordering Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Experts say the virus, despite being extremely virulent, is containable because it kills its victims faster than it can spread to new ones.

The incubation period between exposure and the first symptoms varies from two to 21 days.

There are five species of the virus, of which three are particularly dangerous with fatality rates from 25 to 90 percent, according to the WHO.

It is transmitted through contact with the blood, body fluids, secretions

or organs of an infected person.

The virus has been known to spread at burials where mourners touch the body, but doctors and nurses have also fallen ill after failing to take adequate precautions.

Even testing blood specimens for the disease presents "an extreme biohazard risk", states the WHO, and is done only in the strictest containment conditions.

Experimental treatment

People have contracted the virus after handling infected chimpanzees, gorillas, monkeys, forest antelope and porcupines, dead or alive, in the Ivory Coast, Congo and Gabon.

No medicine or vaccine exists, although [experimental treatment](#) has helped primates fight off the virus however, even after initial symptoms have set in.

The finding in August last could pave the way for therapies against the virus in humans, according to the US scientists who carried out the research.

MB-003, a "cocktail" of antibodies, protected 100 percent of primates when administered within an hour of Ebola exposure and two-thirds of those treated within 48 hours.

The Guinean health authorities and aid agencies including the World Health Organisation, UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Doctors Without Borders have taken or are taking the following measures:

- free treatment for all patients in isolation centres

- a door-to-door campaign raising awareness of individual and collective hygiene measures
- special treatment of the bodies of the dead
- identification of people who have had direct contact with the infected, especially those with fever, diarrhoea, vomiting, fatigue or pronounced bleeding,
- a media campaign raising awareness of the crisis
- disinfection of the homes of the afflicted and the dead
- delivery of [personal protective equipment](#) and hygiene kits to the affected areas
- strengthening of epidemiological surveillance

The Guinea government is also expecting delegations from the Pasteur Institutes in Dakar and Lyon to help with the rapid identification of pathogens in suspected cases.

The WHO and MSF are also boosting numbers in their teams of epidemiologists, logisticians, data managers, communication specialists, anthropologists and disease control specialists in Guinea.

Guinea's airports and borders have so far remained open.

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