

Ebola in mind, US colleges screen some students

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Dr. Robert Palinkas, director of the McKinley Health Center at the University of Illinois, poses in an exam room in Urbana, Ill., Thursday, Aug. 21, 2014. Extra health checks are part of protocols campuses throughout the United States have in place as they prepare for as many as 10,000 students from Nigeria, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, where more than 1,000 people have died in the worst Ebola outbreak in history. (AP Photo/Michael Conroy)

University students from West Africa may be subject to extra health

checks when they arrive to study in the United States as administrators try to insulate their campuses from the worst Ebola outbreak in history.

With the virus continuing to kill in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, the expected arrival of thousands of students from those countries has U.S. authorities on alert but cautioning against alarm.

"I can see why there would be concern; there's no vaccine for it," said Fatima Nor, an 18-year-old freshman at the University at Buffalo, where about 25 students from Nigeria are enrolled for fall. But she said knowing that the virus is transmitted strictly through direct contact with bodily fluids of sick people, and not by sitting next to someone in class, should be enough to calm nerves.

"As long as everyone keeps their personal space, it should be OK," said Nor, of Buffalo.

While the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have issued no specific recommendations for universities, some state [health](#) departments, including in South Carolina and North Dakota, have spelled out for administrators what symptoms to look for and how to react.

Elsewhere, universities are drafting their own precautionary plans against the often-fatal hemorrhagic fever, which causes weakness, vomiting, diarrhea, internal bleeding and sometimes bleeding from the nose and ears.

The American College Health Association recommends its members update emergency plans, find out where patients have traveled and use isolation exam rooms when available. Several colleges are checking the temperatures of students arriving from affected countries and continuing to monitor for fever until any risk of contagion has passed.

"I don't see this as a huge threat on college campuses," said Dr. Susan Even, student health director at the University of Missouri-Columbia and a member of the ACHA, "but it makes sense when you're communicating with students ... to ask a question or two."



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U.S. universities count 9,728 active students from Nigeria, 204 from Liberia, 169 from Sierra Leone and 95 students from Guinea, according to the federal government.

The odds they could bring Ebola to campus seemed too small to worry Laura Washburn, a senior at Tufts University outside Boston.

"It's not like I'm not going to class because someone has been to Africa," she said. "I mean, it's hard to say how paranoid we should be about it, but I feel pretty safe at Tufts."

The roughly 30 Nigerian students expected at the University of Illinois will be pulled aside for a temperature check and private Ebola discussion when they arrive at the health center for mandatory immunization paperwork and tuberculosis screening, said Dr. Robert Palinkas, the center's director.

The plans have been reassuring to the handful of parents who have called wondering whether their child's placement with a West African roommate should give them reason to worry, he said.

"Parents are comforted to know that there is a screening process, that we are alert for it, that we are prepared for it," Palinkas said, "and that we're doing everything we can without infringing on the rights of anybody to make sure their son or daughter is going to have the lowest risk possible."

Similar screenings are planned at the University at Buffalo, Mercer University in Georgia, Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, and the University of Akron in Ohio, the campuses said.

Moses Ogunseye arrived from Lagos, Nigeria, a little over two weeks ago to study at Akron. The 31-year-old graduate student said he spent a few minutes filling out a questionnaire and was given a disposable thermometer to monitor himself for fever for a couple of weeks, something he doesn't mind doing even though he is certain he hasn't been exposed to Ebola.

"I would expect that. It's a very logical thing to do," he said of the screening, which, though voluntary, is encouraged.

Alma Olson, director of Student Health Services at the [university](#), said students are being asked to keep tabs on their temperature for up to 21 days, the length of time it can take for symptoms of Ebola to appear following exposure.

"At the end of the 21-day period they'll come back and we'll check them and send them on their way," Olson said. The CDC requires that any potential Ebola patient be isolated and public health professionals notified.

"There's such a low level of worry" because Ebola doesn't spread easily, she said, "but we really have to be on top of any communicable disease."

Universities in the United Kingdom also are on alert with the expected arrival of thousands of Nigerian [students](#) there. Universities UK, which represents universities, has circulated guidance from Public Health England advising administrators on how to recognize and react to possible cases.

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