

US scientist: Ebola unlikely to become airborne

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Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, testifies before the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations hearing on the Ebola virus on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2014. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

It is unlikely that Ebola would mutate to spread through the air, and the best way to make sure it doesn't is to stop the epidemic, a top U.S.

government scientist told concerned lawmakers Wednesday.

"A virus that doesn't replicate, doesn't mutate," Dr. Anthony Fauci of the National Institutes of Health told a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee.

Fauci said U.S. researchers are monitoring for [mutations](#) in the virus, which has killed at least 2,400 people.

But considering all the dire things to worry about with this out-of-control epidemic in West Africa, that mutation concern is not "something I would put at the very top of the radar screen," said Fauci, head of NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

The unprecedented Ebola outbreak is believed to have sickened nearly 5,000 people, mostly in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. The [deadly virus](#) also has reached Nigeria and Senegal.

Ebola is spread through direct contact with the bodily fluids of sick patients. But as the epidemic has grown, so have questions about whether, if left unchecked, the virus might transform and become more contagious.

In hearings in the Senate and House on Tuesday and Wednesday, lawmakers asked Fauci if it might even become airborne.

Viruses certainly mutate all the time, making mistakes as they copy themselves in order to grow and spread, Fauci explained. Most of those mutations are irrelevant, not associated with any biological change.



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But sometimes, those mutations can make a virus a little more or a little less virulent, or make it a little more or a little less efficient at spreading in whatever way it normally is transmitted, he said.

"Very, very rarely does it completely change the way it's transmitted," Fauci said.

He stressed that he's not saying it's impossible.



Dr. Anthony Fauci, left, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, testifies before the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations hearing on the Ebola virus on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, Sept. 17, 2014. Also at the witness table with Fauci are, from is Nancy Lindborg, third from right, Assistant Administrator at the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance at U.S. Agency for International Development and Dr. Beth Bell, second from right, director of CDC's National Center for Emerging and Zoonotic Infectious Diseases. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

"People might think I'm pooh-poohing it. I'm not," Fauci said.

He said the government had funded the Broad Institute in Boston to study the [virus](#)' mutations. In a publication last month, the researchers reported a somewhat more rapid rate of mutations than expected at that point in the outbreak, but that nothing had jumped out as being of special concern so far.

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