

Lassa fever Fact Sheet

- 1. What is Lassa fever?** Lassa fever is an acute viral illness that occurs in West Africa. The illness was discovered in 1969 when two missionary nurses died of it in Nigeria. The Lassa fever virus (LFV) was named after the town where the first cases occurred. Lassa fever is a significant cause of death and disease in areas of Africa where it occurs. Infection with LFV results in mild to no observable illness in the vast majority of persons infected (80%); however, the remaining 20% typically experience severe disease. Among persons hospitalized for Lassa fever infection, 15-20% die from their illness.
- 2. Where does Lassa fever occur?** Lassa fever occurs in portions of West Africa and is recognized in Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria. However, because the rodent species which carry the LFV are found throughout West Africa, the actual geographic range of the disease may extend to other countries in the region.
- 3. How common is Lassa fever?** There are between 100,000 to 300,000 LFV infections each year in West Africa with approximately 5,000 deaths. In some parts of Sierra Leone and Liberia up to 16% of people admitted to hospital each year have Lassa fever.
- 4. What are the symptoms of Lassa fever?** Symptoms of Lassa fever can include fever, chest pain, sore throat, abdominal and back pain, cough, vomiting, diarrhea, conjunctivitis (red eyes), and facial swelling. Symptoms typically begin 7 - 21 days after the patient comes in contact with LFV.
- 5. How do humans get Lassa fever?** There are a number of ways in which LFV may be spread to humans. LFV occurs naturally in a rodent known as the “multi-mammate rat” which sheds the virus in its urine and droppings. Humans can be exposed to LFV through direct contact with these materials, through contaminated objects or food, or through open skin wounds. Infection can also occur indirectly when a person inhales tiny dust particles in the air contaminated with infected rodent waste. LFV may also spread person-to-person, which occurs when an uninfected person has contact with the blood, tissue, secretions, or excretions of an LFV-infected individual.
- 6. What treatments are available?** An antiviral drug called Ribavirin may work if administered early in the course of the disease. Generally, patients receive supportive therapy which consists of balancing the patient’s fluids and electrolytes, maintaining their oxygen status and blood pressure, and treating them for any complicating infections. There is no vaccination available.
- 7. What protection and control measures are available?** Persons living in or visiting West Africa should avoid contact with rodents and take measures to rodent-proof living quarters. Rodents scavenge for food, so keeping homes clean and food covered and secure will discourage rodents from entering homes.

When caring for patients with confirmed or suspected Lassa fever, further transmission of the disease through person-to-person contact can be avoided by using standard, contact, and droplet precautions against contact with patient secretions and keeping the patient in isolation for the duration of illness.

8. **For more information:**

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/spb/mnpages/dispages/lassaf.htm>

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician and/or veterinarian for specific clinical information related to you or your animal.