

Lassa Fever

Fact Sheet

What is it?

Lassa fever is an illness caused by the Lassa virus. It was named after the town in Nigeria where the first cases occurred. Approximately 80% of people infected show no signs or symptoms. The remaining 20% have severe illness that affects many different body systems. These include sore throat, back and chest wall pain, cough, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea and facial swelling, as well as hearing loss, tremors and inflammation of the brain. Signs and symptoms usually occur 1-3 weeks after the person comes in contact with the virus.

How is it spread to humans?

Lassa fever is spread by a rodent known as the Mastomys, mostly found in West Africa. They shed the virus in urine and droppings. The virus can be transmitted through touching objects or eating food contaminated with these materials, or through cuts or sores. Contact may also occur when a person inhales tiny particles in the air contaminated with rodent excretions. Infection may also occur when these rodents are caught and prepared for food. This illness may also be spread through person-to-person contact through the blood, tissue, saliva, urine or stool of an infected person.

How is it treated?

It can be treated with certain medication which is most effective when given early in the onset of illness. Most people also require treatment for other infections that occur as a result of Lassa fever.

How is it prevented?

Transmission of the virus can be prevented by avoiding contact with the rodent. Store food in rodent-proof containers and keep the home clean to discourage these rodents from entering the home. To prevent person-to-person spread, precautions should include the use of a mask, gloves, a gown and goggles.

Other Questions?

Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 x349. Toll Free 1-800-267-2803 | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | www.hpepublichealth.ca

Reference

- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, Lassa Fever, December 2004.

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