

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Lassa fever?

Lassa fever is a disease caused by an infection with a virus. Most Lassa fever infections are mild and go undiagnosed. About 20% of those infected go on to have more serious symptoms listed below.

How do people get Lassa fever?

People at greatest risk of Lassa virus infection are those who live in, or visit, regions in West Africa and have exposure to the multimammate rat. When people swallow or breathe in particles of urine or droppings from the infected rats, they may become infected with the virus. It can sometimes spread from person to person (see below), but this is much less common.

Can Lassa fever spread from one person to another?

A person can get Lassa fever from another person who is infected **and** showing symptoms of the disease. Lassa fever is spread through direct contact with the blood or body fluids of an infected, person that is showing symptoms of the disease. Casual contact (including skin-to-skin contact without exchange of body fluids) does not spread Lassa fever. It is also spread through exposure to objects (such as needles) that have been contaminated with infected body fluids. Lassa fever is not spread through the air.

What are the symptoms of Lassa fever?

Symptoms of Lassa fever include:

- Fever
- Weakness
- Feeling tired
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Headache

Some people may have more serious symptoms:

- Signs of bleeding (for example in the gums, eyes, nose)
- Difficulty breathing
- Vomiting, swelling of the face
- Pain in the chest, back and abdomen
- Shock
- Hearing loss
- Shaking
- Inflammation of the brain

Symptoms can appear anywhere from one to three weeks after the patient comes in contact with the virus.

Can I get Lassa fever from a person who is infected but doesn't have symptoms?

No. People who do not have symptoms are not contagious.

How is Lassa fever diagnosed?

If a person has the early symptoms of Lassa fever, and there is reason to believe that Lassa fever should be considered, the patient should be isolated at a hospital, and public health professionals should be notified. The NJ Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will work with your doctors to determine whether testing for Lassa fever is needed.

What is the treatment for people with Lassa fever?

An antiviral drug called ribavirin has been used with some success in Lassa fever patients. People with Lassa fever will receive medical care such as fluids, oxygen, blood transfusions, and any other medicines as needed. Early treatment is best.

Where can I get more information on Lassa fever?

- NJ Department of Health www.state.nj.us/health/cd/vhf
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention www.cdc.gov/vhf/lassa

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.
Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention