

Viral Haemorrhagic Fevers (VHF)

Viral hemorrhagic fevers (VHF's) refer to a group of epidemic prone diseases that are caused by several distinct families of viruses. In general, the term "viral haemorrhagic fever" is used to describe a severe multi-system syndrome (multi-system in that multiple organ systems in the body are affected). Characteristically, the overall vascular system is damaged, and the body's ability to regulate itself is weakened. Symptoms are often accompanied by bleeding, though the bleeding is rarely life-threatening. While some types of hemorrhagic fever viruses can cause relatively mild illnesses, many of these viruses cause severe life-threatening diseases.

Viruses causing hemorrhagic fever are initially transmitted to humans when the activities of infected rodents and humans overlap. The viruses carried in rodent reservoirs are transmitted to human contact with urine, fecal matter, saliva, or other body excretions from infected rodents. However, some of these vectors may spread virus to animals, livestock, for example. Humans then become infected when they care for or slaughter the animals.

Specific signs and symptoms vary by the type of VHF, but initial signs and symptoms often include marked fever, fatigue, dizziness, muscle aches, loss of strength, and exhaustion. Patients with severe cases of VHF often show signs of bleeding under the skin, in internal organs, or from body orifices like the mouth, eyes, or ears. Some viruses that cause hemorrhagic fever can spread from one person to another. In the African region there are many types of VH fevers which have and continue to pose serious health risks: Marburg and Ebola haemorrhagic fevers, Crimean Congo Haemorrhagic Fever (CCHF), Rift Valley Fever (RVF), Lassa Fever, Yellow Fever and the newly emergent Arena Virus.

The Role of the Epidemic and Pandemic Alert and Response (EPR) Programme

- Encourage widespread vaccination and immunization in epidemic and inter-pandemic periods;
- Provide technical support to strengthen routine vaccination;
- Support countries through provision of contingency stocks during inter-epidemic periods;
- Develop vaccines with greater efficacy.

What WHO/AFRO is doing to combat Viral Haemorrhagic Fevers

WHO is committed to the management and control of VHF in the region, providing technical support to the epidemiological block to ensure support and improve disease surveillance and reporting to WHO among 18 West African countries. WHO also oversees the implementation of the IDSR projects in the four endemic countries.

AFRO continues to lead the development of steps for systemic implementation of IDSR in participating countries. This includes development of a protocol for assessment of the disease surveillance and control system; adaptation of technical guidelines and tools essential for planning, implementation and monitoring of project activities; and pilot testing of these materials. AFRO plays a key role in advocacy and sharing of experiences in surveillance, early warning and outbreak response activities, thereby contributing to improved country programme planning and implementation.



Challenges

- Lack of resources for outbreak control; funds, reliable communications and transport;
- The frequent occurrence of conflicting, unplanned, activities in project countries has handicapped project implementation activities and WHO visits;
- Delayed and slow implementation of planned activities;
- Resistance to change from health management information system and from participants in some vertical programmes;
- Integration of surveillance and response networks within countries.

Our Goals

- Assess risk of VHF through risk assessment activities;
- Build capacity through clinician, laboratory diagnostic, health promotion and vector control support;
- Undertake research on reservoir of virus and transmission mode (Arena virus);
- Raise awareness within at risk countries to strengthen surveillance and early warning systems for VHF;
- Strengthen collaboration between veterinarian services and health services for rapid detection of VHF outbreaks.

Partners

Through the support of national governments and partners the VHF programme is able to implement and coordinate a successful programme. Partners include the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD); Early Warning and Response Network (EWARN); United Nations Fund for International partnership (UNFIP); Global Outbreak and Response Network (GOARN); and the JW Lee Centre for Strategic Health Operations (SHOC).

Helpful Resources or Websites

- www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/Spb/mnpages/dispages/vhf.htm
- www.who.int/publications/en/
- http://whqlibdoc.who.int/emro/2002/WHO-EM_CSR_012_E_L.pdf
- [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/1998/WHO EMC ESR 98.2 \(sections1-4\).pdf](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/hq/1998/WHO EMC ESR 98.2 (sections1-4).pdf)

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