

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 the disease is endemic (constantly present). The disease is mild in 80% of all infected people and severe in 20%. Severe disease has a case-fatality rate (percent of ill persons) approaching 50% during the occasional epidemics. The death rate for ill pregnant women in their third trimester is much higher.
- 2. Where does Lassa fever occur?** Lassa fever is an endemic disease in portion 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 typically occur 7 - 21 days after the patient comes in contact with the LFV. These include fever, retro-sternal pain (pain behind the chest wall), sore throat, abdominal and back pain, cough, vomiting, diarrhea, conjunctivitis (red eyes), facial swelling, protein in the urine and mucosal bleeding. Permanent hearing loss, tremors and encephalitis have also been described
- 5. How do humans get Lassa fever?** There are a number of ways in which the LFV may be spread to humans. The reservoir, or host, of LFV is a rodent known as the “multi-mammate rat” which shed the virus in their urine and droppings. LFV can be transmitted through direct contact with these materials, through contaminated objects or food, or through cuts or sores. Infection can also occur when a person inhales tiny dust particles in the air contaminated with infected rodent waste. LFV may also spread person-to-person. This type of transmission occurs when an uninfected person comes in contact with the virus in the blood, tissue, secretions, or excretions of an infected individual.
- 6. What treatments are available?** A drug called Ribavirin (an antiviral drug) 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?** An attempt should be made to identify all people in close contact with infected individuals, including people living with or caring for the infected and laboratory workers handling specimens. Those contacts should



receive body temperature checks for at least three weeks. Immediate hospital isolation should be enacted for any contacts with fever at or above 101°F during this period. When caring for patients with Lassa fever, further transmission of the disease through person-to-person contact can be avoided by taking preventive precautions against contact with patient secretions (isolation precautions or barrier nursing methods).

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.