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Ebola Viral Disease (EVD) Overview for State Employees

Ebola is a virus that can cause a serious and potentially life threatening illness. In the current ongoing outbreak, there have been over 9,000 patients with this illness in Africa, over half of whom have died. Several people have been brought to the U.S. for specialized medical care. To date, there have been two cases of transmission within the U.S., in healthcare workers caring for a patient at a hospital in Dallas, TX.

Risk areas: The current outbreak is primarily in three countries in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea. All contacts of the cases of Ebola in the US are being carefully monitored.

How Ebola is spread: Ebola is spread only by direct contact with blood or other body fluids (especially vomit or diarrhea, but also urine or sweat) of an infected person who currently has symptoms of Ebola or who has recently died from Ebola. People who do not have symptoms are not infectious. Ebola is not spread through air, water, insects, nor generally spread by food.

Symptoms: The incubation period is usually 8-10 days, but can be as short as 2 days or as long as 21 days. Symptoms can include fever, diarrhea, vomiting, muscle aches, headache, and abnormal bleeding.

Who is at risk: ***People who have had direct contact with bodily fluids of an ill person who has been in Liberia, Sierra Leone or Guinea within the last 21 days, or any documented Ebola case.***

Treatment: There are currently no vaccines or specific, proven treatments available. Providing supportive care early in the course of the disease can markedly improve chances of survival.

Laboratory testing for Ebola: Testing for Ebola is limited. Testing can only be done with approval from the Tennessee Department of Health (TDH) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), for high-risk patients.

Prevention: Recognizing and immediately isolating people who may be infected with Ebola is critical for their health and to prevent transmission. Suspect patients should be put immediately in a closed room, and hospital and health department experts rapidly consulted. Appropriate use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in the healthcare setting is critical. This requires a person in charge, adequate equipment, instruction, practice, and having someone carefully observe putting on and taking off their PPE every single time. Expected PPE includes double gloving, gown, goggles, mask, and leg and shoe covers. The virus does not live long outside the body, and can be destroyed with common disinfectants (like bleach), autoclaving, or incineration. Appropriate handling of waste materials is critical.

More information: This sheet provides only a very basic overview of Ebola, and the situation continues to change. A tremendous amount of up-to-date information, including recommendations for healthcare institutions, care providers, and the public is widely available, and can be accessed via the TDH website and CDC website.

Medical providers or those in need of additional information are encouraged to call their local or regional health departments (contact information) or the state health department at (615) 741-7247.

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Rights, Duties and Responsibilities of Workers and Employers

All employees should follow standard infection control methodologies in the workplace, such as frequent hand-washing and use of antibacterial gels, covering coughs and sneezes, and staying at home when they are ill.

Health care and other employees have the right to remove themselves from a work situation that they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to their life or health. When an employee exercises this right, he or she must be protected from retaliation for expressing a safety concern.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, U.S. employers may make inquiries into medical conditions only where they are job related and consistent with business necessity. Because there are not international travel restrictions and because the risk of transmission is very low, requiring a medical examination for returning travelers would likely not be considered a necessity.

The Tennessee Department of Health will be tracking any illnesses and exposures in Tennessee and will communicate any changes in the status of the outbreak. Additional information is available on the TDH website.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has accepted that addressing communicable illnesses is a legitimate area of inquiry. In the unlikely event an employee receives a positive diagnosis of EVD, it must be reported to the Tennessee Department of Health immediately (615-741-7247). TDH will coordinate with the Tennessee Department of Human Resources to ensure appropriate communication with others in the workplace that a) safeguard the health and safety of co-workers and b) protect the privacy of the employee.