



## Information for Humanitarian Aid Workers returning from areas affected by Viral Haemorrhagic Fever (VHF)



### What is Viral Haemorrhagic Fever? (VHF)

VHF is a severe, often fatal, infectious disease of humans and non-human primates (monkeys, gorillas, and chimpanzees) and bats, caused by viruses including the Ebola virus and the Lassa virus. It was first recognised in 1976 and has caused sporadic outbreaks since in several African countries.

For more information on the latest outbreak of VHF, check the [HPSC VHF website](#).

### How is VHF spread?

Outbreaks of VHF Virus Disease typically begin when a person comes into contact with an infected animal, or with animal products that are infected with the virus. VHF viruses can be spread from one person to another. VHF is also thought to be spread by consumption of infected bushmeat.

VHF viruses are usually transmitted in the following ways:

- Direct contact with the blood and/or body fluids (urine, faeces, saliva, vomit and semen) of a person, suffering from or having died with, VHF.
- Direct contact with items that have been contaminated with the virus, such as soiled clothing, bed linen or used needles.
- Unprotected sexual contact with patients who have recently recovered from the disease (up to three months).

### What are the symptoms of VHF Virus Disease?

VHF illness usually has a sudden onset between 2 and 21 days after exposure to the virus.

The initial signs and symptoms may include some of the following:

- Fever
- Weakness
- Muscle and joint pains
- Headache
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting

Other symptoms may include stomach pain, rash and sore throat. Later, there may be unexplained bruising or bleeding. Death may occur.

### What do I need to do when I return home?

It is important that you contact your local [Public Health Area](#) **within 24 hours** of your return home so that your risk category can be assessed, and to allow any monitoring activities to be initiated as soon as possible. Depending on the work that you undertook while providing humanitarian aid in an affected country, there may be a requirement for you to be **monitored for 21 days** following your return home.

You will be monitored for 21 days if you are in any of the following groups of returning workers

- People who had casual contact with a VHF case (in the same room, in the patient's house, on airplane) but did not have any direct contact with the patient or his/her body fluids.
- People who had direct contact with a VHF patient or his/her body fluid while wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE).
- People who had unprotected direct contact (i.e. without wearing PPE) with skin or mucous membranes of an VHF patient or to potentially infectious blood or body fluid

If you are in any of these groups and you are vaccinated, you will still need to be monitored for 21 days.

If you are not in one of these groups (i.e. you had no contact with VHF patients or articles potentially contaminated by them) you will not need to be monitored

### I am in one of the above groups and will need to be monitored, what happens next?

After you have contacted your local [Public Health Area](#) on your return, you will be assessed by a public health physician. Depending on which risk category you are placed in, it may be necessary to follow you up for **21 days** following your last contact. During the monitoring period, you will be asked to note and report any symptoms you develop and to check your temperature daily. If you are vaccinated, you will still be required to self-monitor and report any illness or symptoms.

### Use of medicines such as aspirin, paracetamol or ibuprofen

Certain medicines can have the effect of reducing body temperature during a fever (antipyretic). Medicines with an antipyretic effect, including aspirin, paracetamol or ibuprofen, can lower your body temperature. Therefore, for up to 8 hours after taking an

antipyretic, thermometer measurements may show an artificially low temperature. You must contact your local public health contact prior to taking such a medicine for further advice.

If it is agreed that you should take antipyretic medication, please take your temperature beforehand. If it is 37.5°C or higher then you must contact your local public health contact immediately. A temperature of 37.5°C is always significant, whether you are taking one of these medicines or not, and must be reported urgently.

Should you travel to another country during your 21 day monitoring period, it is advised that you continue your monitoring. Public Health authorities in the other country will be advised of your travel. This is to facilitate your ongoing monitoring as per the protocols in the destination country to ensure that should you develop symptoms, you can get the care you need and that onward spread in that country is prevented.

#### Non-VHF Healthcare while you are undergoing monitoring:

Should you need to access healthcare for a reason that is clearly unrelated to VHF, the process will be determined by the urgency of your problem.

If the problem is non-urgent, contact your General Practitioner by phone in the first instance and make them aware that you are undergoing monitoring for VHF. Then contact the department of public health to discuss the arrangements that you have made. Ideally, non-urgent healthcare issues would be managed by telehealth if possible.

If you have an **urgent** need for medical attention, **please phone 999/112**. Make sure to tell the call-taker that you are undergoing monitoring for VHF. They will inform the attending crew and the receiving hospital.

#### I am in one of the above groups – Will I need to stay off work?

Depending on the risk category you are placed in, there may be restriction on your returning to work in a healthcare setting or other high-risk setting.

If you are a healthcare worker and you have been designated as 'high risk' then you may attend office-based work but not provide clinical care or work in patient areas. If you are not a healthcare worker it is unlikely there will be restriction on your returning to work.

If you are not a high risk contact then it is unlikely that there will be any restrictions to your returning to work. However, all decisions are subject to a public health risk assessment at the time and it is possible that restrictions may be placed on your ability to return to work, regardless of which risk category you fall into.

### **I am considered a high risk contact – Is there anything else I should know?**

If you are considered to be a High-Risk contact, there may be some restriction on overseas travel in the **21 days following your return to Ireland**. High risk contacts should discuss travel within Ireland with the Public Health Area, preferably at least two days before travel, and advise them of your proposed travel destination and contact details while you are away. In general there will be no restrictions on attendance at social events as long as you remain without symptoms. You should refrain from giving blood for at least two months after contact with a VHF case. You should avoid unprotected sex and use barrier contraception during the 21 day monitoring period.

See more information for humanitarian aid workers on the HPSC website [here](#).