

Is there a connection between dogs and Ebola virus?

Ebola is in the news a lot due to the current and largest outbreak in West Africa resulting in over 4,000 human fatalities, and the first cases in the United States. The virus is named after the Ebola River in The Democratic Republic of Congo where the disease was first documented in 1976. In primates, Ebola causes massive internal and external bleeding, resulting in a high mortality rate within two weeks of symptoms appearing. There are no vaccines against the virus and experimental drugs are being used in some instances currently.

The disease is known to spread by a person contacting bodily fluids from another person infected with Ebola. There is also evidence that the virus can be spread from animals to people. The virus has been documented in many species of animals in Africa (antelope, bush pigs, rodents, etc.) that may transmit the virus to a person who hunts them and touches or eats them. The current outbreak of Ebola is presumed to have started with the natural reservoir of the virus, fruit bats. Apparently bat soup is a popular food in the region of concern. Humans and other primates are the primary victims of the disease. It has caused the death of thousands of gorillas. Many other animals can be infected without succumbing.

There are concerns that dogs or other domestic animals might also be involved in the spread of the virus. Guinea pigs, goats and horses can all be infected experimentally with Ebola without showing the classic signs of the disease, but in the wild the virus hasn't been documented in these species or in felines. A published study found antibodies to the Ebola virus in dogs living in the villages where human cases were reported. Since the dogs did not show symptoms of the disease, there is a possibility they may serve as carriers without getting sick from the virus. It is the fear of the currently unproven spread from dogs to humans that caused authorities in Spain to order the euthanasia of the pet dog of a nurse suffering from Ebola.

There is certainly a lot more research that needs to be done to identify the possible ways the disease can be spread as well as its prevention and treatment.

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