



Students wash their hands at a handwashing station at school as part of heightened Ebola prevention measures encouraged by the Ministry of Health. Regular hand hygiene remains one of the key safeguards against the spread of infectious diseases. PHOTO/FILE/

Ebola: Everyday habits that could save your life

With Ebola cases reported in neighbouring DR Congo, experts say protection depends less on complex medical intervention and more on consistent daily habits at home, in schools, workplaces and public spaces.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

The familiar rhythm of footsteps along the dusty roads from Kasese, Mpondwe and neighbouring districts has fallen silent.

A group of pilgrims, who had begun trekking in their usual prayerful walk to the Uganda Martyrs Shrine at Namugongo in preparation for this year's Martyrs Day celebrations, have been forced to turn back.

The annual pilgrimage, marked by hymns, rosaries and roadside prayers, had once again gathered momentum as the faithful retraced a journey that has become a defining ritual of Uganda's religious calendar. But this year, the road leads home.

The decision follows President Yoweri Museveni's directive postponing the commemoration after an Ebola outbreak in neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo. The World Health Organisation had reported that the outbreak had already claimed lives there, heightening fears of cross-border transmission. Authorities were compelled to place public

health and safety above one of the country's largest annual gatherings. For many pilgrims, the directive has left plans in limbo, turning what is usually a season of spiritual preparation into one marked by uncertainty and concern.

Heightened surveillance

Dr Diana Atwine, the Ministry of Health permanent Secretary, says the situation escalated after a Congolese national succumbed to an imported case of the Ebola Bundibugyo strain. That marked a critical turning point for Uganda's public health response, prompting heightened surveillance across border districts and health facilities.

Some pilgrims from DR Congo had already arrived in Kasese District, but authorities moved in to conduct Ebola screening exercises. Screening has since been strengthened at entry points, community monitoring intensified, and updated guidelines issued to frontline health workers and the public. The measures, Dr Atwine notes, are aimed at reducing the risk of cross-border transmission and ensuring early detection as the country remains on heightened alert.

Emergency preparedness

Response measures have been activated at national level and in high-risk districts, including the deployment of a mobile laboratory at Bwera Hospital.

"We have also put in place isolation arrangements, infection prevention and control measures, coupled with specialised risk communication strategies. Already, we have isolated

a high-risk contact who is a close relative to a deceased case," Dr Atwine said.

All health workers, especially those in public facilities, are urged to remain vigilant and observe heightened safety precautions.

The signs and symptoms of Ebola include nausea and vomiting, severe headache, cough, body rash, diarrhoea, chest pain, high fever, red eyes and unexplained bleeding. Private health facilities have been called upon to observe standard operating procedures and report any suspected cases to the nearest district health authorities for further investigation.

Standard operating procedures

The public should avoid physical contact with anyone showing symptoms of the disease. Frequent handwashing with soap and good hand hygiene are essential.

Contact with body fluids, including urine, blood, sweat, saliva, vomit and stool, should be avoided. If symptoms appear, individuals should seek appropriate health care immediately. Handling of bodies suspected to have Ebola should be supervised by trained health teams through safe and dignified burials.

For any suspected case, Ugandans can call the toll-free number 0800-100-066 or send a free SMS to 6767.

Dr Rosemary Byanyima, executive director of Mulago National Referral Hospital, urges citizens to maintain high standards of hygiene and avoid physical contact with individuals showing visible symptoms of illness. She further calls on Ugandans to strictly follow preventive guidelines and promptly report suspected cases to the nearest health facility.

Schools placed on high alert

Schools are high-risk environments due to close interaction among learners, teachers and staff. All institutions are now required to strictly implement standard operating procedures to protect everyone within school settings.

Handwashing facilities with clean

UNDERSTANDING THE RISK PERIOD

Dr Ken Odong, a physician based in Gulu, northern Uganda, explains that the Ebola Bundibugyo strain has an incubation period of up to 21 days before symptoms begin to appear.

During this period, an infected person may appear healthy while still carrying the virus, making early detection and prevention especially challenging.

Due to this delayed onset, communities, institutions and households must remain consistently vigilant rather than waiting for visible signs of illness.

running water and soap must be available at all entrances, classrooms, dormitories, dining areas, toilets and staff rooms. Temperature screening points are required at all entrances with entry restricted for anyone showing Ebola-related symptoms. Regular cleaning and disinfection of classrooms, dormitories, toilets, bathrooms, dining halls, school vehicles and frequently touched surfaces has also been emphasised. Proper waste management and disposal are other critical measures.

Avoid physical contact

Handshakes are discouraged. The public is strongly advised to avoid physical contact, as close interaction can easily spread Ebola if one person is infected.

Both schools and households are encouraged to improve ventilation by keeping windows and doors open where possible to allow free air circulation and reduce transmission risk in enclosed spaces.

These directives come as the government intensifies containment efforts. Health authorities have already traced and isolated contacts linked to confirmed patients as part of ongoing surveillance.

Public gatherings

All event organisers must now seek prior clearance before staging any event, as mass gatherings can increase transmission risk. Public gatherings will be subjected to inspection and risk assessment before approval, ensuring organisers put strict preventive measures in place.

Events such as sports activities, prayer congregations, crusades, and pilgrimages will only be allowed after health teams assess risk levels and confirm compliance with safety protocols. Organisers must demonstrate preparedness for sanitation, crowd control, emergency response and screening procedures.

The public is also cautioned to limit or postpone high-risk social gatherings such as funerals and weddings, which often involve close physical contact and large crowds. Political events, such as rallies and campaign gatherings, have also been identified as high-risk settings due to crowd density and prolonged interaction.

Officials stress these measures are preventive, aimed at protecting communities while allowing essential activities to continue under strict guidance.