

# World Health Report **2019 Predictions**



## EBOLA | Predictions for Ebola in the DRC

As the number of cases of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of Congo approaches 550, and fatalities almost 320, it is clear that this outbreak is far from over.

**Now established as the second largest Ebola epidemic in history, further infections are to be expected far into 2019.**

Women have so far been disproportionately affected with the virus. This has been attributed to their greater involvement with caring for sick family members, their role in local burial rites, and their exposure to healthcare settings – all of which can potentially put women in close contact with Ebola patients increasing their risk of infection. As in previous outbreaks, it will only be when both men and women in the local community are able to accept the guidance of healthcare professionals that reductions in these forms of transmission will be achieved.

The on-going militia activity in the region is a major factor that is hindering the efforts of the WHO and partners. These regular rebel attacks have necessarily halted vaccination

and quarantine efforts, and have already provoked the withdrawal of some healthcare experts to the safety of the Kinshasa, many hundreds of miles away from Ebola-affected cities.

**All these events will continue to conspire to increase the case numbers throughout most of 2019.**

If other epicentres of disease are established in neighbouring countries to DRC, as is feared, control of the epidemic will take much longer to establish.

As has occurred with other Ebola epidemics, even *after* the successful resolution of an outbreak, isolated *recurrences* are very likely to occur for many months. The consequences of these recurrences have previously been limited, however, as the Ebola surveillance processes established during the epidemic have facilitated the prompt diagnosis and quarantine of those few infected. Whether this rapid control will be possible in the DRC, whilst militia activity persists, is much less certain.



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## ZIKA | Predictions for Zika in India and the Americas



**Zika is likely to be widely reported in 2019, if not for new epidemics, then for the delayed consequences of past infection - only now receiving attention.**

Early reports from both the USA and Brazil suggest that some babies born to mothers infected with Zika are only now developing abnormalities, after birth. Around 6% of babies infected *in the womb* will have profound neurological deformities resulting in *microcephaly*, the abnormally small head seen in many images of babies from Brazil during the 2016 epidemic. What is only recently coming to light, is that of those *born with a normal appearance*, a further 8% of babies can have developmental delay, movement problems, or even seizures. These can occur during the first weeks to months following birth, making the total of those babies affected by Zika as **one in seven**. A much larger proportion of babies than was previously thought.

It is unlikely that *large* outbreaks of Zika will occur for several years in countries recently affected by the mosquito-borne virus, as many in the population have now acquired a degree of immunity following infection. Outbreaks in countries previously spared, such as India, are only now being reported.

**In 2019 it is likely that further outbreaks will continue in India and its population of 1.3 billion.**

As no cases of microcephaly have as yet been reported in India, it is at present unclear what the consequences of Zika will be for the subcontinent.

## MALARIA | Predictions for malaria in tropical countries

Although malaria cases are still counted in the hundreds of millions each year, *deaths* from this mosquito-borne disease have decreased by around 30% over the last decade. Over the past year, epidemics of malaria have occurred in countries facing particular economic hardships as they have often resulted in a reduction in mosquito prevention programmes, or simply a failure in basic hygienic measures such as refuse collection. Both have led to increase the environments permissive for mosquito propagation, resulting in thousands of malaria cases in countries such as Venezuela, and also Angola.

**In 2019, malaria epidemics will continue in tropical countries undergoing significant hardship.**

This is certainly true in the DRC at present, where in addition to the Ebola outbreak, a malaria epidemic is also currently occurring. A sad fact is that mothers and their children seeking treatment for malaria have sought help in treatment centres that unknowingly also had some Ebola patients – some of those attending for malaria were thus infected with Ebola.

## MERS | Predictions for MERS in the Middle East



The Middle East Respiratory Syndrome or more simply MERS, is the severe respiratory infection that first produced a handful of cases in 2012. Since then over 2,000 individuals have been infected, mostly from Saudi Arabia. The infection has often been caught directly from its animal host, the camel, after which the disease is particularly severe. Others who acquire the illness from MERS-infected patients have milder symptoms – but this is not true for those who also have a chronic medical condition: they too often develop a severe disease. To date almost 800 people in total have died from MERS.

**A low level of new MERS infections persists in the Middle East, and will continue to do so into 2019.**

One piece of good news is that as clinical suspicion of the disease continues to rise, the likelihood of a large outbreak outside of the Arab peninsula remains low. This is best demonstrated by two cases of MERS imported to South Korea, one in 2015, and one during the past year. The first case of MERS was undiagnosed for a significant period of time during which several local people were also infected, eventually leading to almost 200 infections, 38 deaths, and the need to quarantine 16,000 individuals. In South Korea in 2015, people stopped eating out in restaurants, or going to cinemas. Tourism and business were affected, eventually resulting in a slump in the country's economic growth.

In distinction, the solitary MERS case in South Korea *this year* was diagnosed swiftly, led to no further infections and involved only 20 people who had to be quarantined. A real triumph of medical management.

## BIRD FLU | Predictions for bird flu pandemic

Influenzas affecting birds have been a newsworthy feature for several years.

Whilst acknowledging the economic consequences for bird farmers, it is the possibility of a bird flu capable of infecting *humans* that continues to concern many. In recent years the bird flu, **H7N9**, has produced a modest number of infections in China; most associated with bird farmers or those who have had direct contact with poultry. Transmissibility between humans is poor with H7N9, however, meaning that an epidemic (or its big brother, the *pandemic* - during which transmission to several countries occurs) is *very unlikely* to occur.

As over the last century pandemics of other viruses have regularly resulted, many think that a novel bird flu might be a candidate for the next large pandemic. Whether this will occur in 2019, or in a later year, the important issue is to ensure that your organisation has adequate **pandemic planning** – knowing what to do when an outbreak occurs, reducing the risk for both your staff and your business. Pandemics sadly are a certainty.

To find out how you can get a free assessment of your current plans contact us at [enquiries@healix.com](mailto:enquiries@healix.com)

## MEASLES & MUMPS | Global predictions



**Both *measles* and *mumps* have seen outbreaks in 2018, this is very likely to continue in 2019.**

The uptake of the MMR vaccine is still poor in many regions, not least Europe which still suffers from misconceptions concerning vaccines. Despite the MMR vaccine being shown to be safe, over 14,000 cases of measles alone were confirmed in 2018 following poor uptake of the immunisation in Europe.

Several decades have elapsed since the measles vaccine was discovered, so many do not remember the 500,000 adults and children that used to fatally succumb to the virus each year, around the globe. Although a return to these dark days is unlikely, it is important to remember what progress the MMR represents and what is at risk when children are not vaccinated.

## CHOLERA | Predictions for cholera in Africa

2018 has seen many outbreaks of cholera. From Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Niger, to Cameroon, Somalia, and the much-beset DRC, thousands of cases have occurred this year. Associated with countries that have a compromised sanitation infrastructure, contamination of drinking water occurs with the bacteria *Vibrio cholerae* resulting in those infected suffering with a severe watery diarrhoea. If a source of purified water is found, many patients can replenish these losses simply by drinking clean water and replacing the salts that are lost. For others, dehydration can rapidly occur, resulting in multi-organ failure and death, especially in children.

**In 2019, further epidemics of cholera are sadly inevitable as countries continue to have unsafe water provision, compounded by times of particular hardship.**

Cholera vaccines are available for those unaffected, but during epidemics clean water and electrolytes save lives.

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