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Ebola Virus RNA Can Persist Inside the Human Eye Nearly a Decade After Recovery

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Surviving acute Ebola virus disease does not always mean the virus's genetic footprint disappears completely from the body. In a November 2026 clinical study published in The Lancet Microbe , a team led by Dr. Steven Yeh at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) Truhlsen Eye Institute and international collaborators reported that traces of Ebola virus RNA can remain inside the human eye for an average of nearly nine years after initial recovery. Evaluating patients in Sierra Leone who required retinal surgery -- including survivors of the 2013-2016 West African Ebola outbreak -- the researchers detected viral RNA in the clear gel filling the back of the eye in two survivors roughly nine years post-infection.

This finding marks the longest recorded persistence of Ebola genetic material inside an immune-privileged site -- an anatomical compartment where the body naturally limits aggressive immune attacks to protect delicate tissues from swelling and permanent damage.

Why the Eye Acts as a Viral Sanctuary

To preserve clear vision, the human eye maintains a carefully regulated barrier between the bloodstream and internal ocular tissues. If everyday immune cells flooded the eye with full-force inflammation every time a microbe passed nearby, fragile structures like the retina would quickly scar and fail. Because of this protective "immune privilege," however, viruses that slip inside during severe systemic infections can evade normal immune clearance.

Earlier clinical studies dating back to 2015, including the Ebola Virus Persistence in Ocular Tissues and Fluids (EVICT) research program, showed that live virus or viral RNA could be found in the aqueous humor -- the watery fluid in the front chamber of the eye -- during the months shortly after recovery. Follow-up testing over later years showed that the front chamber eventually cleared. The new UNMC-led findings reveal a crucial distinction: even after the front of the eye tests negative, viral RNA can persist much longer deeper inside the vitreous fluid , the jelly-like substance filling the main rear cavity of the eye.

| Ocular Compartment or Metric | | Key Clinical Finding |

| Study Cohort | | Retinal surgery patients in Sierra Leone (2013-2016 outbreak survivors, household contacts, and controls) |

| Aqueous Humor (Front Chamber) | | Can harbor viral RNA early after recovery, but typically clears in subsequent years |

| Vitreous Fluid (Rear Cavity) | | Viral RNA detected in two survivors roughly nine years after acute infection |

| Survivor Uveitis Prevalence | | Affects approximately 13% to 34% of Ebola

survivors |

Connecting Long-Term RNA Persistence to Uveitis

Between 13% and 34% of Ebola survivors develop uveitis , a painful and potentially blinding inflammation inside the eye. For years, eye specialists have worked to determine whether late-onset flare-ups are driven purely by an overactive immune response or by lingering viral material hiding in ocular tissues. Detecting Ebola RNA in the vitreous gel nearly a decade later provides direct evidence that viral remnants can remain in the posterior eye far longer than previously documented.

Importantly, finding viral RNA fragments does not automatically mean infectious, replicating virus is present, nor does it mean survivors pose a transmission risk through casual contact. Instead, persistent viral antigens -- molecular pieces of the virus -- may help explain why some survivors experience chronic intraocular inflammation requiring specialized medical monitoring.

Improving Long-Term Eye Care for Survivors

For ophthalmologists performing cataract or retinal surgeries in West Africa and future outbreak zones, understanding where viral RNA can linger helps guide safe surgical protocols and targeted anti-inflammatory therapies. By mapping how immune-privileged compartments behave years after acute recovery, clinicians can better protect vision for thousands of Ebola survivors while deepening scientific understanding of long-term viral reservoirs.

References & Primary Sources

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