Overview of Rift Valley Fever

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Laiba Nadeem[1], Zehra Irshad[2], Muhammad Zain-Ul-Abedin[3], Athar Hussain[4], Warda Irfan[1], Ali Raza[3, 5], Sheikh Muhammad Usman[6], Abdullah Channo[7,8] and Chanda Naseem[1, 9]

ABSTRACT

Emerging viral diseases pose significant threats to global health and economies, exemplified by recent epidemics of Ebola and Zika viruses. Rift Valley Fever (RVF), caused by the Rift Valley fever virus (RVFV), is a zoonotic disease primarily affecting domestic ruminants and camels. Originating in Kenya in 1931, RVF has a broad geographic distribution, with endemicity in sub-Saharan Africa and occasional outbreaks in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. The virus is transmitted through mosquitoes, with zoonotic transmission occurring through direct contact with infected animals or their products. Mosquito control, hygiene practices, and personal protective measures are crucial for mitigating zoonotic transmission risks. RVF outbreaks coincide with heavy rainfall and flooding, impacting livestock, trade, and human health. Risk factors include mosquito exposure, direct contact with infected animals, handling infected tissues, and consuming contaminated animal products. The pathogenesis involves entry, replication, systemic spread, immune response, hepatic involvement, hemorrhagic manifestations, neurological complications, and fetal complications in pregnant women. Clinical manifestations range from mild flu-like symptoms to severe hemorrhagic fever and neurological complications. Diagnosis involves serological and molecular tests, with vaccination, vector control, and surveillance essential for prevention and control. Future research priorities include vaccine development, enhanced surveillance, innovations in vector control, climate change impact studies, and antiviral therapies. Collaborative efforts, incorporating the One Health approach, are critical to addressing RVF challenges comprehensively. Continued investment in research and development is essential for advancing knowledge, improving prevention strategies, and minimizing the socioeconomic consequences of RVF outbreaks, safeguarding public health and animal populations.

Keywords: Rift Valley Fever (RVF), Zoonotic Transmission, Epidemiology, Prevention, Research Priorities

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[1]Department of Emerging Health Professional Technologies, Faculty of Allied Health Sciences, Superior University, Lahore, 54000, Pakistan
[2]Department of Animal Nutrition, Faculty of Animal Production and Technology, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore, 54000 Lahore, Pakistan
[3]Faculty of Veterinary Sciences, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan
[4]Faculty of Veterinary Sciences, Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Sakrand, 67210, Pakistan
[5]Department of Veterinary Pharmacology, Faculty of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Sciences (AHVS), Sindh Agriculture University, Tandojam, Sindh
[6]Department of Anatomy, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, 42000, Pakistan
[7]Pakistan Agricultural Research Council-Arid Zone Research Centre (PARC-AZRC), Umerkot, 69100, Pakistan
[8]Department of Animal Reproduction, Faculty of Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Sciences, Sindh Agriculture University, Tandojam, 70060, Pakistan
[9]Department of Physiology, Faculty of Veterinary Sciences, University of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Lahore, 54810, Pakistan
***Corresponding author:** chanda.naseem@uvas.edu.pk; chanda.naseem@superior.edu.pk

1. INTRODUCTION

Rift Valley Fever (RVF) is a viral disease primarily affecting domestic ruminants and camels, commonly seen in sub-Saharan Africa (Søren et al. 2020). The disease is caused by the Rift Valley fever virus (RVFV), transmitted by mosquitoes and blood-feeding flies. While the virus primarily affects animals, it also can infect humans (Małgorzata et al. 2021). Human infections can result from contact with the blood or organs of infected animals or from the bite of infected mosquitoes. The disease in humans can range from a mild flu-like illness to severe hemorrhagic fever, which can be lethal. Most people with RVF have either no symptoms or a mild disease, but a small percentage can develop more severe symptoms. Human-to-human transmission of RVF has not been documented (Daniel et al. 2019).

The first discovery of RVF was in sheep in the Rift Valley province of Kenya in 1931. Since then, outbreaks have been reported in sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. The disease has also been reported outside Africa, with the first cases reported in Saudi Arabia and Yemen in 2000 (Mohamed et al. 2019).

The outbreaks of RVF have demonstrated the potential for these diseases to impact both animal health and the global economy negatively. For example, following small sporadic outbreaks of RVF, a widespread epidemic occurred in South Africa in 2010 and 2011, leading to significant economic losses due to high mortality rates in young animals and waves of abortions in pregnant females (Daniel et al. 2019). The outbreaks of other emerging viral diseases, such as the Ebola virus in 2014-15, 2018, and 2020, and the Zika virus in 2015-16, have also demonstrated the potential for these diseases to negatively impact both human health and the global economy in unpredictable ways (Safder et al. 2021).

2. ZOONOTIC NATURE OF RIFT VALLEY FEVER

The primary means by which the RVF virus is transmitted to ruminants is through mosquito bites, particularly those from infected mosquitoes of the Aedes and Culex genera (Alex et al., 2022). During outbreaks, most cases result from mosquitoes becoming infected after feeding animals the virus and

transmitting it to others during subsequent blood meals. This mosquito-borne transmission is the primary driver of RVF infections (Yusuf et al., 2020). However, other pathways of zoonotic transmission have also been observed. Direct contact with infected animal tissues, such as handling infected carcasses, blood, or other fluids, can transmit the infection to humans (Fabian et al., 2022). Certain occupations, including livestock farming, veterinary care, and meat processing, increase the risk of zoonotic RVF transmission due to regular exposure to infected animals or their products (Elysse et al., 2019).
Numerous studies have highlighted the zoonotic potential of RVFV (Keli et al. 2022). Serological surveys conducted in regions where the disease is endemic have identified RVFV-specific antibodies in individuals involved in animal husbandry, indicating past exposure to the virus (Caroline et al. 2020). Case reports and epidemiological investigations have also linked human infections to direct contact with infected animals or their products (Jonathan et al. 2022).
To mitigate the risk of zoonotic transmission, it is crucial to implement preventive measures and raise awareness about RVF. Mosquito control strategies, such as applying insecticides and eliminating mosquito breeding sites, are essential for reducing the mosquito population. Promoting good hygiene practices, including safe handling and proper disposal of animal carcasses, and implementing personal protective measures for individuals at high occupational risk can help minimize the chances of zoonotic RVF transmission (Mehmood et al. 2021).

3. EPIDEMIOLOGY

3.1. GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF RIFT VALLEY FEVER

Rift Valley Fever (RVF) primarily occurs in sub-Saharan Africa as an endemic disease, with occasional outbreaks documented in other parts of the world (Keli NG et al. 2022). The geographical distribution of RVF can be summarised as follows:

3.2. SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

RVF is endemic in several countries across sub-Saharan Africa, including Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Madagascar, and Senegal. These countries have experienced recurring outbreaks of varying magnitudes. The prevalence of RVF in this region is closely associated with ecological factors, such as rainfall patterns and competent mosquito vectors (Earl et al. 2022) (Getahulivestock et al. 2022).

3.3. ARABIAN PENINSULA

RVF outbreaks have been reported in the Arabian Peninsula, specifically in Saudi Arabia and Yemen. The first documented outbreak occurred in Saudi Arabia in 2000, followed by animal and human outbreaks. The climate and landscape of the Arabian Peninsula provide conducive conditions for RVFV transmission by mosquito vectors (Mutaz 2019).

3.4. OUTBREAKS BEYOND AFRICA AND THE ARABIAN PENINSULA

Although RVF is primarily concentrated in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, isolated cases and outbreaks have been reported outside these regions. These occurrences are often linked to travel or the movement of infected animals or animal products. For instance, RVF outbreaks have occurred in Egypt, Mauritania, and Niger, where infected livestock or animal products were imported from endemic areas (Yahya et al. 2022).

4. INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE

4.1. INCIDENCE OF RIFT VALLEY FEVER

The occurrence of RVF cases is primarily associated with the circulation of the virus among animal reservoirs. Mosquitoes, particularly those of the Aedes and Culex species, are crucial in transmitting the virus between animals and humans. RVF outbreaks often coincide with periods of heavy rainfall and flooding, which facilitate mosquito breeding and the subsequent spread of the disease (Wanjama et al. 2022).

4.2. PREVALENCE OF RIFT VALLEY FEVER

RVF prevalence varies based on geographical location, environmental factors, and the presence of suitable vectors and animal reservoirs. The disease primarily affects domestic livestock, particularly cattle, sheep, and goats, leading to high mortality rates among newborn animals and causing abortions in pregnant animals. RVF outbreaks have severe economic consequences, resulting in livestock losses, reduced milk production, and disruptions in livestock product trade (Cynthia et al. 2021).

Human prevalence of RVF is closely linked to occupational exposure to infected animals or their products. Individuals at high risk include veterinarians, farmers, slaughterhouse workers, and laboratory personnel (Keli et al. 2023).

5. RISK FACTORS

The key factors that contribute to the transmission of the virus.

5.1. EXPOSURE TO MOSQUITOS

Mosquitoes, particularly species like Aedes and Culex, play a crucial role in transmitting Rift Valley Fever. Individuals living or working in areas with high mosquito populations face an elevated risk of contracting the virus. This is particularly true for those involved in agriculture, livestock farming, or regions with inadequate mosquito control measures (Andrea et al. 2020).

5.2. DIRECT CONTACT WITH INFECTED ANIMALS]

Direct contact with infected animals, especially during birthing or slaughtering, poses a significant risk of RVFV transmission (Abdala et al. 2020).

5.3. HANDLING INFECTED ANIMAL’S TISSUES AND BLOOD

Handling infected animal tissues, blood, or other biological fluids can expose individuals to the Rift Valley Fever virus. This risk is especially relevant in slaughterhouses, where workers may encounter contaminated materials. Infection can occur through cuts, abrasions, or mucous membranes (Elysse et al. 2019).

5.4. CONSUMPTION OF CONTAMINATED ANIMAL PRODUCTS

Consuming raw or undercooked meat, milk, or other animal products from infected animals increases the risk of RVFV transmission. Thorough cooking of meat and pasteurization of milk is essential to eliminate the virus and reduce the risk of infection. Lack of awareness about the disease and its transmission routes contributes to consuming contaminated animal products (Mohamed et al. 2019).

5.5. OCCUPATIONAL EXPOSURE

Certain occupations, such as veterinarians, healthcare workers, laboratory personnel, and researchers studying the virus, face an elevated risk of acquiring Rift Valley Fever. These individuals are more likely to contact infected animals or handle virus specimens. Adherence to biosafety protocols and using personal protective equipment (PPE) is critical in mitigating this risk (Veerle et al. 2019).

5.6. CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Environmental conditions and climate significantly influence the prevalence and transmission of Rift Valley Fever. Heavy rainfall followed by periods of drought creates favorable breeding sites for mosquitoes, leading to increased transmission. Floods can also displace animals, contributing to the spread of the virus. Climate change and environmental disruptions can potentially expand the geographic range of RVFV, thereby increasing the risk of transmission to new areas (Dan et al. 2023).

6. PATHOGENESIS

The pathogenesis of RVF involves a series of events following infection with the RVFV. Here is an explanation of the pathogenesis of RVF:

6.1. ENTRY AND INITIAL REPLICATION

RVFV enters the body through mosquito bite or contact with infected animals or their tissues. The virus primarily targets and infects cells of the liver, spleen, and lymph nodes. The virus replicates in these cells upon entry, producing new viral particles (Lieza et al. 2021).

6.2. SYSTEMIC SPREAD

Once the virus replicates, it can disseminate throughout the body via the bloodstream. RVFV can infect various organs and tissues, including the liver, spleen, kidneys, and central nervous system (CNS). This systemic spread contributes to the diverse clinical manifestations observed in RVF (Lukas et al. 2022).

6.3. IMMUNE RESPONSE

The immune response plays a critical role in the pathogenesis of RVF. The virus triggers the activation of immune cells, including macrophages, dendritic cells, and lymphocytes, producing pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines. The immune response aims to control viral replication, but excessive or dysregulated immune activation can contribute to tissue damage and disease severity (Ashgan et al. 2020).

6.4. HEPATIC INVOLVEMENT

The liver is a significant target of RVFV infection, and liver damage is a characteristic feature of RVF. Hepatocytes, the primary cells of the liver, become infected and undergo cell death, leading to inflammation and disruption of liver function. This can manifest as elevated liver enzymes, jaundice, and hepatomegaly (Muqadas AS et al. 2023).

6.5. HEMORRHAGIC MANIFESTATIONS

RVFV infection can cause hemorrhagic manifestations in some cases. The virus can damage blood vessels, leading to bleeding tendencies. This can result in hemorrhagic diathesis, petechiae (small red or purple spots on the skin), and more severe bleeding complications (Trevor et al. 2019).

6.6. NEUROLOGICAL INVOLVEMENT

In severe cases, RVFV can invade the central nervous system (CNS), leading to neurological complications. Meningitis, encephalitis, and meningoencephalitis can occur, causing symptoms such as headache, confusion, seizures, and coma (Tasneem et al. 2021).

6.7. PREGNANT WOMEN AND FETAL COMPLICATIONS

Pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to RVFV infection. The virus can cross the placental barrier and cause severe fetal complications, including fetal malformations, stillbirths, and neonatal deaths (Cynthia et al. 2021).

7. CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF VALLEY FEVER

The clinical manifestations commonly associated with Rift Valley fever in humans:

7.1. MILD SYMPTOMS

Many cases of RVF present as a mild illness resembling the flu. Symptoms can include fever, headache, muscle and joint pain, weakness, fatigue, and loss of appetite (Daniel et al. 2023).

7.2. HEMORRHAGIC FEVER

Severe cases can progress to hemorrhagic fever, characterized by bleeding tendencies. This may include bleeding from the gums, nose, or other mucous membranes, as well as the presence of small red or purple spots (petechiae) or more extensive bruises (ecchymoses) on the skin (Compton et al. 2020).

7.3. OCULAR MANIFESTATIONS

Rift Valley fever can occasionally affect the eyes, leading to symptoms such as redness, inflammation, and impaired vision (Madeline et al. 2022).

7.4. HEPATIC INVOLVEMENT

The virus can cause inflammation of the liver (hepatitis), resulting in elevated liver enzymes, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), and abdominal pain (Leanne et al. 2022).

7.5. NEUROLOGICAL COMPLICATIONS

Rarely, RVF can lead to neurological manifestations, including inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) and the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord (meningitis). These complications can cause confusion, seizures, coma, and potential long-term neurological issues (Dominique et al. 2020).

8. DIAGNOSIS AND MANAGEMENT

8.1. DIAGNOSTIC TESTS FOR RIFT VALLEY FEVER

The RVF diagnosis involves clinical evaluation, laboratory tests, and consideration of epidemiological information (Christelle et al. 2019). Several diagnostic tests are commonly used for Rift Valley fever.

8.2. SEROLOGICAL TESTS

These tests detect antibodies the immune system produces in response to (RVFV) infection. Examples include enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and indirect immunofluorescence assay (IFA). Serological tests can indicate whether a person has been exposed to the virus, but they may not be effective during the early stages of infection (Baratang et al. 2019).

8.3. MOLECULAR TESTS

Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests are used to detect the genetic material (RNA) of RVFV. PCR tests can identify the virus in blood, tissues, or other samples, providing a definitive diagnosis. These tests are susceptible and specific, enabling early virus detection before symptoms appear (Changwoo et al. 2023).

8.4. VIRAL ISOLATION

Rift Valley fever virus can be isolated from blood or other body fluids in specialized laboratories. This involves growing the virus in cell cultures or using specific laboratory animals. Viral isolation is a time-consuming process that requires advanced biosafety facilities (Elisa et al. 2020).

- LFIA chromatographic tests have been explored as a potential tool for rapid and point-of-care diagnosis of diseases. These tests typically detect specific antigens or antibodies related to the disease in patient samples, such as blood or serum. The LFIA format is well-suited for use in resource-limited settings and field conditions where quick results are essential (Sören et al. 2020).
- Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISAs) and immunohistochemistry (IHC) tests can detect viral antigens in clinical samples. Although less commonly used than serological and molecular methods, they can be valuable in certain situations (Lieza et al. 2020).

8.5. EPIDEMIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

In regions where RVF is prevalent, typical clinical symptoms, combined with a history of exposure to infected animals or mosquito bites, can raise suspicion of the disease. Epidemiological data, such as local outbreaks or reports of RVF in animals, can support the diagnosis (Franziska et al. 2022).

9. PREVENTION AND CONTROL

9.1. MANAGEMENT OF RIFT VALLEY FEVER

Managing RVF involves several critical supportive care, prevention, and control components. Here are the main aspects of RVF management.

9.2. SUPPORTIVE CARE

Patients with RVF receive supportive care to relieve symptoms and promote recovery. This includes rest, proper hydration, and over-the-counter medications like acetaminophen (paracetamol) to manage fever and pain. In severe cases, hospitalization and close monitoring may be necessary (Elizabeth et al. 2022).

9.3. MANAGEMENT OF COMPLICATIONS

Specific interventions may be required if RVF progresses to severe manifestations such as hemorrhagic fever or encephalitis. These can include blood transfusions for managing bleeding, respiratory support for severe breathing difficulties, and anticonvulsant medications for seizures associated with neurological complications (Leanne et al. 2022).

9.4. PREVENTION OF SECONDARY INFECTIONS

RVF can weaken the immune system, making patients more vulnerable to secondary bacterial or fungal infections. Appropriate antibiotics or antifungal therapy may be administered if such infections occur (Mathilde et al. 2023).

9.5. VECTOR CONTROL

To prevent the transmission of RVF to humans, controlling the mosquito population is crucial. This involves insecticide spraying, using bed nets, and eliminating mosquito breeding sites like stagnant water sources (Lotty et al. 2019).

9.6. ANIMAL VACCINATION AND CONTROL

Vaccination of susceptible animals such as sheep, goats, and cattle can be implemented to reduce the risk of transmission. During outbreaks, animal movement restrictions and quarantines may also be enforced (Edna et al. 2019).

9.7. PERSONAL PROTECTIVE MEASURES (PPM)

Individuals residing in or visiting RVF-endemic areas should take precautions to avoid exposure to infected animals and mosquito bites. This includes wearing protective clothing (e.g., long sleeves, pants), using insect repellents, and sleeping under bed nets (Keli et al. 2023).

9.8. SURVEILLANCE AND REPORTING

Early identification and reporting of RVF cases are crucial for effective outbreak response. Healthcare providers and public health authorities should promptly report suspected cases to facilitate surveillance and the implementation of control measures (Abdala et al. 2020).

10. FUTURE RESEARCH ON RIFT VALLEY FEVER

Future work on Rift Valley fever (RVF) involves various research and development areas to advance our knowledge of the disease, improve prevention and control strategies, and create new tools and interventions (William et al. 2022). Here are some potential directions for future work on RVF:

10.1. VACCINE DEVELOPMENT

Priority is given to the development of safe and effective RVF vaccines. Future research can focus on advancing vaccine candidates based on recombinant proteins, viral vectors, or nucleic acids. The goal is to enhance the availability, affordability, and accessibility of RVF vaccines for both animals and humans to prevent outbreaks (Tetsuro 2019).

10.2. ENHANCED SURVEILLANCE

Improving RVF surveillance systems is essential for early detection and timely response. This involves developing more sensitive and specific diagnostic tests, including rapid and point-of-care tools. Integrating surveillance data with advanced modeling techniques can improve prediction and forecasting capabilities (Aurélie et al. 2021).

10.3. INNOVATIONS IN VECTOR CONTROL

Innovative approaches to vector control can help reduce mosquito populations and limit RVF transmission. Future research can explore novel insecticides, improved delivery systems, alternative vector control strategies (e.g., biological controls), and the study of ecological factors that influence mosquito populations (Hassani et al. 2020).

10.4. CLIMATE CHANGE AND RVF

Investigating the potential impact of climate change on RVF transmission is critical. Understanding the relationship between climate variability, mosquito ecology, and RVF outbreaks can help develop adaptation strategies and early warning systems for at-risk regions (Rania et al. 2019).

10.5. ANTIVIRAL THERAPIES

Research can explore antiviral therapies specific to RVF. This involves studying the viral replication cycle, identifying potential drug targets, and developing antiviral agents with efficacy against RVFV (Nicholas et al. 2022).

Continued research, innovation, and collaboration are necessary to address the challenges posed by RVF. By focusing on these areas, we can advance our understanding of the disease, develop effective prevention and control strategies, and ultimately reduce the burden on human and animal health.

11. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, RVF presents a significant risk to human and animal well-being. The RVFV causes it and is primarily transmitted through mosquitoes. RVF outbreaks can lead to substantial socioeconomic consequences, including livestock losses and human illness or death. Efforts to prevent and control RVF necessitate a comprehensive approach involving collaboration among public health authorities, veterinary services, and other relevant stakeholders. Key strategies encompass vector control, animal vaccination, restrictions on animal movement, personal protective measures, safe handling of animal products, awareness campaigns, surveillance, and early detection.

However, there remains a need for ongoing research and development in the field of RVF. This includes the development of effective and safe vaccines, enhancement of surveillance systems and diagnostic tools, innovative approaches to vector control, strengthening the One Health approach, deepening our understanding of transmission dynamics and the impact of climate change, effective risk communication, and exploration of antiviral therapies specifically targeting RVFV. By continuing to invest in these areas, we can advance our knowledge of RVF, improve prevention and control strategies, and minimize the consequences of RVF outbreaks. This comprehensive approach is essential for protecting public health, preserving animal populations, and reducing the overall burden associated with Rift Valley fever.

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