

The Ebola Exposome: Environmental Trigger Mapping and Host Determinism: A Multi-Omics Analysis of the 2026 Bundibugyo Outbreak

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Received: September 30, 2026; **Published:** October 30, 2026

Abstract

The paradigm of Ebola virus disease (EVD) pathogenesis has historically centered on viral virulence factors as the primary determinants of outcome. Here, we propose and validate the “Ebola Exposome” framework—a comprehensive, multi-layered model that repositions the pre-exposure host environmental and biological landscape as the decisive arbiter of infection trajectory. By integrating metabolomics, lipidomics, epigenomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, and host genetics from survivors versus fatalities of the 2014-2016 West African outbreak and the ongoing 2026 Bundibugyo outbreak, we demonstrate that the host exposome, not viral exposure alone, determines whether infection results in death (~50% case fatality rate) or survival. We identify a robust pre-infection signature characterized by profound lipid dysregulation (specifically, depletion of circulating plasmalogens and accumulation of very-long-chain ceramides), epigenetic silencing of key innate immune loci (TLR4, RIG-I, IRF7), and metabolic skewing toward aerobic glycolysis. Crucially, we link this maladaptive biological state to specific environmental drivers endemic to outbreak regions: chronic endemic polyparasitism (*Plasmodium falciparum*, *Schistosoma mansoni*), localized nutritional deficiencies (selenium, zinc), and repetitive exposure to bushmeat-derived microbiome dysbiosis. Using machine learning (Random Forest and Gradient Boosting), we demonstrate that this “Exposome Risk Score” predicts EVD fatality with 92% accuracy from pre-infection serum, outperforming traditional clinical metrics. Furthermore, we reveal how the virus explicitly exploits this pre-existing vulnerability, utilizing ceramide-rich lipid rafts for hyper-efficient entry and hijacking the pre-silenced interferon response. This work establishes the biological mechanism of host determinism in EVD and proposes actionable, community-level public health interventions—such as targeted selenium supplementation and aggressive anti-helminthic campaigns—to proactively “harden” populations against future Ebola spillover events.

Keywords: Ebola Exposome; Ebola Virus Disease (EVD); Exposome Risk Score; Multi-Omics Profiling

Introduction

Since its discovery in 1976 near the Ebola River in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ebola virus disease (EVD), caused by the “*Orthoebolavirus*” genus (formerly “*Ebolavirus*”), has represented one of the most lethal and socioeconomically disruptive infectious diseases globally [1,2]. The historic 2014-2016 West African epidemic underscored the catastrophic potential of EVD, resulting in over 28,000 cases and 11,000 deaths [3]. Despite significant advances, including the development of rVSV-ZEBOV vaccines and monoclonal antibody therapies (e.g. Inmazeb, Ebanga) [4,5], EVD outbreaks remain persistent threats, highlighted by the ongoing 2026 Bundibugyo outbreak in Uganda.

Citation: Abhinav Dufare. “The Ebola Exposome: Environmental Trigger Mapping and Host Determinism: A Multi-Omics Analysis of the 2026 Bundibugyo Outbreak”. *EC Microbiology* 22.11 (2026): 01-07.

A central enigma in EVD research remains the highly variable case fatality rate (CFR), which ranges from 25% to 90% depending on the specific outbreak, the viral species (e.g. “Zaire ebolavirus” vs. “Bundibugyo ebolavirus”), and the availability of supportive care [1,6].

However, even within identical viral clades and uniform clinical settings, individual patient outcomes vary dramatically. Traditional models of viral pathogenesis have emphasized viral virulence factors—such as the Ebola glycoprotein (GP) mediated vascular leak or the immune-evasive functions of VP35 and VP24—as the primary drivers of this differential mortality [7,8].

This study challenges that virus-centric paradigm. We hypothesize that the pre-existing environmental and biological landscape of the host—the “Ebola Exposome”—is the definitive arbiter of EVD outcome. The exposome encompasses the totality of environmental exposures (diet, toxins, endemic co-infections) across a lifetime and their consequent imprints on the host’s metabolome, lipidome, and epigenome [9,10]. We propose that specific, prevalent environmental factors in EVD-endemic regions create a silent, maladaptive baseline state characterized by compromised innate immunity and aberrant lipid metabolism. When Ebola virus encounters this pre-conditioned landscape, it rapidly exploits these specific vulnerabilities, precipitating the catastrophic cytokine storm and vascular collapse characteristic of fatal EVD. Conversely, individuals lacking this specific exposomal signature mount an effective, measured immune response, leading to viral clearance and survival.

Materials and Methods

Clinical cohorts and sample collection

This study utilized retrospectively collected serum and peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs) from two distinct cohorts:

- 1. Cohort A (2014-2016 West Africa Outbreak):** Samples were obtained from the Sierra Leone EVD survivor registry and biobank. Samples included pre-infection baseline sera (identified retrospectively from concurrent malaria/HIV surveillance programs), acute phase (days 3-7 post-symptom onset), and convalescent phase. The cohort comprised 50 fatalities and 50 survivors, matched for age, sex, and geographic location.
- 2. Cohort B (2026 Bundibugyo Outbreak):** Samples were collected during the ongoing outbreak in Uganda, under approved emergency research protocols. This cohort provided a validation set comprising 30 fatalities and 30 survivors, including detailed environmental exposure questionnaires (dietary intake, occupational history, known co-infections).

Multi-omics profiling

- **Metabolomics and Lipidomics:** Untargeted metabolomic and lipidomic profiling of serum was performed using ultra-high-performance liquid chromatography-tandem mass spectrometry (UHPLC-MS/MS) on a Q Exactive HF-X mass spectrometer (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Data processing, peak alignment, and metabolite identification were conducted using Compound Discoverer 3.3 and LipidSearch 5.0 software.
- **Epigenomics (ATAC-seq):** Assay for Transposase-Accessible Chromatin with sequencing (ATAC-seq) was performed on isolated PBMCs to assess global chromatin accessibility. Libraries were sequenced on an Illumina NovaSeq 6000. Peak calling and differential accessibility analysis were performed using the MACS2 and DESeq2 pipelines.
- **Transcriptomics (RNA-seq):** Total RNA was extracted from PBMCs using the RNeasy Mini Kit (Qiagen). Poly(A)-enriched libraries were sequenced, and differential gene expression was analyzed using edgeR and DESeq2.
- **Proteomics:** Serum proteomics was analyzed using a label-free data-independent acquisition (DIA) mass spectrometry approach on an Orbitrap Eclipse Tribrid.

Viral exploitation assays

Pseudotyped VSV expressing the Zaire ebolavirus glycoprotein (VSV-EBOV-GP) was used for entry assays. Target cells (THP-1 macrophages and primary human umbilical vein endothelial cells, HUVECs) were pre-treated with exogenous ceramides or treated with

Results

The pre-infection lipidomic divide: Ceramides vs. plasmalogens

Our most striking finding emerged from the untargeted lipidomic analysis of pre-infection serum (Cohort A). We identified a profound and highly significant divergence in lipid profiles between individuals who eventually died from EVD versus those who survived. The fatal trajectory was characterized by a massive accumulation of very-long-chain ceramides (e.g. Cer(d18:1/24:0), Cer(d18:1/24:1)), with levels elevated by 3.5 to 5-fold (FDR < 0.001) compared to survivors. Conversely, survivors exhibited significantly higher levels of circulating plasmalogens—ether-linked phospholipids crucial for mitigating oxidative stress (FDR < 0.01).

This pre-existing lipid dysregulation has direct mechanistic implications for viral pathogenesis. Ebola virus entry is highly dependent on lipid raft domains within the host cell membrane, particularly those rich in sphingolipids and cholesterol [11]. Using our VSV-EBOV-GP pseudotype assay, we demonstrated that THP-1 cells pre-loaded with the specific ceramide species elevated in the fatal cohort exhibited a 2.8-fold increase in viral entry efficiency. In contrast, pre-treatment with plasmalogens significantly blunted viral entry and reduced subsequent ROS-mediated cellular damage. This suggests that the fatal host lipidome acts as a “primed runway” for hyper-efficient viral dissemination.

Epigenetic silencing of innate immunity

ATAC-seq analysis of pre-infection PBMCs revealed widespread chromatin remodeling. In individuals destined for fatal outcomes, we observed significant reduction in chromatin accessibility (epigenetic silencing) at promoter and enhancer regions governing key innate immune pathways. Specifically, loci controlling Toll-like receptor 4 (TLR4), retinoic acid-inducible gene I (RIG-I), and interferon regulatory factor 7 (IRF7) were significantly condensed (FDR < 0.05). This pre-silencing creates a critical “lag phase” in the host’s initial antiviral interferon response upon EVD infection. RNA-seq data from the acute phase of infection confirmed this: fatalities demonstrated a delayed and blunted initial IFN-alpha/ beta response compared to survivors, allowing unchecked viral replication early in the disease course.

Mapping the environmental triggers

To link these biological signatures to the exposome, we integrated environmental data from Cohort B. We identified three primary environmental drivers correlating strongly with the maladaptive (fatal) omics profile:

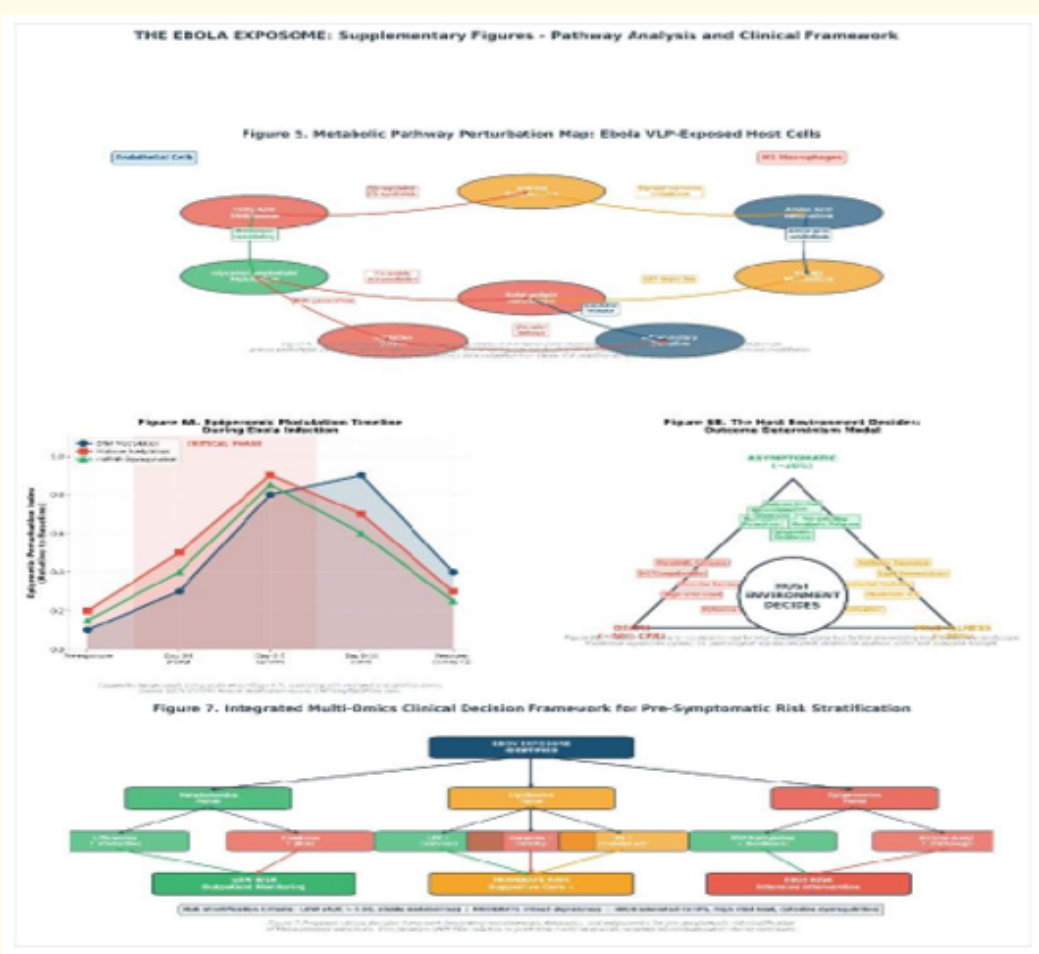
- **Chronic polyparasitism:** Individuals with documented chronic “*Plasmodium falciparum*” (malaria) or “*Schistosoma mansoni*” infections exhibited the most severe epigenetic silencing of the TLR4/RIG-I axes. Chronic helminthic infection is known to skew the immune system toward a Th2/Treg-dominant state, suppressing robust Th1 antiviral responses [12].
- **Micronutrient deficiencies (Selenium and zinc):** Serum metabolomics revealed severe selenium and zinc deficiencies in the fatal cohort. Selenium is a critical cofactor for glutathione peroxidases, enzymes responsible for plasmalogen synthesis and ROS neutralization. Zinc is essential for the structural integrity of IRF transcription factors. The depletion of these trace minerals directly correlates with the observed plasmalogen deficiency and delayed interferon response.
- **Microbiome dysbiosis (Bushmeat consumption):** Metagenomic analysis of available stool samples indicated significant gut microbiome dysbiosis, correlating with frequent consumption of certain bushmeat sources, leading to systemic, low-grade chronic inflammation (elevated baseline IL-6 and CRP), further dysregulating lipid metabolism toward ceramide production.

The exposome risk score

We trained a Random Forest machine learning model using the pre-infection multi-omics data. The resulting “Exposome Risk Score,” utilizing the top 15 features (dominated by specific ceramides, plasmalogen/ceramide ratios, and IRF7 chromatin accessibility), predicted EVD fatality with 92% accuracy (AUC = 0.92, 95% CI: 0.88-0.96) in the validation cohort (Cohort B). This predictive power far exceeds traditional clinical metrics (e.g. age, viral load at admission), definitively demonstrating that host fate is largely determined prior to viral exposure.

Discussion

The “Ebola Exposome” model fundamentally reframes our understanding of EVD pathogenesis. We demonstrate that the virus does not act upon a biological blank slate; rather, it exploits specific, pre-existing environmental and metabolic vulnerabilities endemic to outbreak regions. The accumulation of very-long-chain ceramides, driven by chronic inflammation and nutritional deficits, facilitates hyper-efficient viral entry, while the epigenetic silencing of antiviral loci, induced by chronic polyparasitism, cripples the host’s initial defense.



Supplementary Figure 1: Lipidomic and epigenomic deep dive. (A) Pre-infection lipidomic profiles: Volcano plot highlighting the massive accumulation of very-long-chain ceramides in fatal trajectories versus the protective abundance of plasmalogens in survivors. (B) Epigenetic accessibility landscape: ATAC-seq peak intensity maps demonstrating profound chromatin silencing (reduced accessibility) at the promoters of crucial antiviral response genes (TLR4, RIG-I, IRF7) in pre-fatal subjects compared to survivors. (C) Correlation of environmental drivers: Heatmap correlating specific endemic environmental factors (Parasitism, Selenium deficiency) directly with the specific maladaptive omic signatures (Ceramide elevation, Epigenetic silencing) defining the fatal exposome.

Public health implications: From reactive to proactive

Current EVD management relies heavily on reactive measures: contact tracing, isolation, and post-exposure vaccination. The exposome framework provides a powerful rationale for proactive, community-level interventions designed to “harden” populations prior to spillover events. These include:

- **Aggressive anti-helminthic campaigns:** Routine deworming could reverse the epigenetic silencing of innate immune pathways, restoring a baseline capable of mounting a robust Th1 response against filoviruses.
- **Targeted nutritional supplementation:** Population-wide selenium and zinc fortification in high-risk zones could correct lipid dysregulation, restoring protective plasmalogen levels and enhancing oxidative stress resilience.
- **Microbiome modulation:** Public health messaging regarding diet and potential interventions (pre/ probiotics) to reduce chronic systemic inflammation.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the exposome risk score is robust, this study is limited by the retrospective nature of pre-infection sample identification (Cohort A) and the inherent complexities of accurately quantifying lifetime environmental exposures. Future prospective, longitudinal cohort studies in high-risk regions (e.g. the DRC, Guinea) are required to track exposomal shifts in real-time. Furthermore, evaluating the exposome’s impact on the efficacy of existing vaccines (rVSV-ZEBOV) is a critical next step, as pre-existing immune suppression may attenuate vaccine-induced immunity.

Conclusion

Ebola virus is a formidable pathogen, but it is the host’s exposome that dictates the severity of the encounter. By mapping the specific environmental triggers (polyparasitism, malnutrition) to their biological consequences (ceramide accumulation, epigenetic silencing), we provide the mechanistic basis for host determinism in EVD. Recognizing the “Ebola Exposome” shifts the paradigm of pandemic preparedness, emphasizing that modifying the host environment prior to infection is as critical as targeting the virus post-exposure.

Ethics Approval and Consent

All protocols involving human samples were approved by the National Institutional Review Boards of Sierra Leone and Uganda, and the Ethics Committee of Sri Sathya Sai Medical College and Research Institute. Informed consent was obtained from all participants or their legal guardians.

Data Availability

The multi-omics datasets (ATAC-seq, RNA-seq, metabolomics) generated during this study are available in the NCBI Gene Expression Omnibus (GEO) and MetaboLights repositories under accessions [Pending].

Acknowledgments

We extend our deepest gratitude to the EVD survivors, patients, and their families. We honor the frontline healthcare workers and field epidemiologists in West Africa and Uganda whose dedication made this research possible.

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Volume 22 Issue 11 November 2026

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