Hendra Virus

Information for veterinarians

What is Hendra virus?
Hendra virus is a virus of flying foxes (fruit bats) which on very rare occasion may cause acute disease in horses and people, which can be fatal.

Transmission
• Flying foxes are the natural host for Hendra virus (HeV) and do not show clinical signs.
• The virus may spread from flying fox to horse, horse to horse or horse to human.
• The exact route of transmission to the horse is unknown; it is likely through consumption of material contaminated by infected flying fox bodily fluids and excretions.
• Reported situations have mostly involved one horse without others becoming infected.
• HeV has been transmitted to people through very close contact with bodily fluid, especially respiratory secretions, from an infected horse.

Occurrence in the Northern Territory
There have been no known cases of HeV infection in horses or people in the NT. The black flying fox and the little red flying fox are found around the Top End and NT bats have tested seropositive for HeV.

Advice to horse owners
Information for NT horse owners detailing steps for the protection of horses and people is available on our website. Veterinarians should continue to encourage all horse owners to strongly consider HeV vaccination of their horses.

Clinical signs in horses
HeV can cause a range of clinical signs in horses and should be considered in any sick horse where the cause of illness is unknown, especially where there is;
• Rapid onset of illness
• Respiratory signs
• Pyrexia
• Neurological signs
• Tachycardia
• Rapid progression to death

The incubation period of HeV in horses is usually between 5-16 days. Most horses die within two days of developing clinical signs.

It should be noted that HeV can be excreted 2 days prior to clinical signs; diligent use of PPE during examination is crucial.

Investigation of a suspected case
Initial investigation of horses with acute disease is performed by the local private veterinarian. An example investigation protocol is outlined on the next page.

If HeV is suspected, contact the Chief Veterinary Officer on 8999 2130 or the Emergency Animal Disease hotline on 1800 675 888.

Private veterinarians who examine horses should be familiar with the document ‘Guidelines for veterinarians handling potential Hendra virus infections in horses’ available for download at www.daff.qld.gov.au.

Hendra virus infection is a notifiable disease and all suspect cases should be reported to the Chief Veterinary Officer.

For more information contact your regional Animal Biosecurity Office
Darwin 8999 2035   Katherine 8973 9716   Tennant Creek 8962 4458   Alice Springs 8951 8181

Last updated 16/03/2016
For more information visit www.nt.gov.au
**Procedure for investigating a potential case of Hendra virus**

**Assess case for HeV risk**
- Consider clinical signs
  - acute onset illness?
  - pyrexia?
  - tachycardia?
  - depression?
  - weight shifting?
  - respiratory signs?
  - neurological signs?

**Determine**
- HeV vaccination status?
- recent illness of other horses?
- exposure to bats?

**Client with sick horse...**

**Suspect HeV case**
- Advise owner to isolate sick horse immediately using PPE

**Determine precautions for exam**
- Ensure minimum PPE (for vet & assistants)
  - rubber boots
  - splash proof overalls
  - disposable gloves (double) – face shield/ eyewear
  - particulate respirator
- Organise disinfectant and waste disposal gear
- Ensure correct sampling gear (pre-label containers)
- Revise entry & exit process

**Sample collection**
- Safely collect (in preference order)
  - EDTA blood
  - Plain blood
  - Swabs (nasal, oral, rectal mucosal, urine soaked, in VTM or saline)
- If the horse is dead collect swabs only. Do not perform a post mortem.

**Biosecurity advice**
- Isolate horse from all humans/animals
- Stop horse equipment moving off property
- Stop horse movement off/on to property
- Contact DPIF to report case and for carcass disposal advice
- Advise neighbours of investigation
- PPE to be worn if horse contact necessary

**HeV not suspected**
- If your initial case assessment changes and you suddenly suspect HeV
  - Immediately withdraw to safe area
  - Wash off contamination with soap and water and shower
  - Seek prompt medical advice and notify DPIF
  - Only proceed with case with PPE and proper protocols

**Sample submission**
- Advise BVL of incoming sample on 89992249
  - Complete Specimen Advice Note (SAN)
  - Triple pack as class A biological substance
  - Label 2nd container ‘POSSIBLE HENDRA SAMPLE’
- Preliminary results available in approx. 6hrs.

**Key Contacts**
- Report case immediately
  - Chief Veterinary Officer 8999 2130
  - EAD Hotline (24hrs) 1800 675 888
- For human health advice
  - Centre for Disease Control 8922 8044
  - CDC Doctor (after hours) 8922 8888
- Direct media enquiries to DPIF
  - DPIF Media Manager 8999 2073

**For more specific advice, refer to the resource**

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