

Friday, 4 September 2009

### Hendra virus strikes again

Veterinarians and horse-handlers need to be on alert with the deadly Hendra virus (HeV) again striking.

In central coastal Queensland, a second vet has died after becoming infected with the virus when inspecting unwell horses, some of which have since been put down.

Importantly, the horse that was the source of infection for the vet had only mild non-specific clinical signs when examined initially, and it was only in retrospect that HeV was suspected.

Hendra virus antibodies have been found in all four species of flying foxes (or fruit-eating bats - *Pteropus spp.*) which occur on mainland Australia and all populations of flying foxes in Australia are potential sources of HeV infection; hence it is possible there will be further horse, and human, exposure to the virus.

Sadly, there is no specific treatment for the disease in horses; of those horses that do become infected with HeV, 70 - 80% will die, and the remainder are put down to reduce the risks to other horses, and people. There is always the possibility that HeV infection will become dormant and recur at some unpredictable time in the future in a horse that has recovered from a clinical HeV infection.

President of the Australian Horse Industry Council, Dr Barry Smyth, says the latest outbreak is of great concern to horse handlers and emphasises the danger of the virus.

"It's not transmitted directly from flying-foxes to people so far as we know, horses are the intermediaries.

"People can become infected with HeV when they come into contact with an infected horse and its secretions."

*"People who own, handle, or live or work near horses where there are flying-fox populations need to be careful, and be aware of biosecurity practices that can be implemented."*

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Dr Smyth, himself a veterinarian, says the virus is difficult to detect. “Currently there is no rapid diagnostic test to detect HeV infection in the field. Samples must be sent off to a laboratory for examination.

“While their heart rate and temperature tend to go up first, horses can have the virus, and be excreting it for a couple of days, before they show any clinical signs of the disease.

“Also, when the clinical signs do appear, they are not specific to Hendra virus infection – the signs might be due to other diseases.

“As detection and diagnosis are difficult, it’s vital that precautions should be taken, wherever flying foxes are found.”

Dr Smyth says this means being biosecurity aware, and minimising contact with sick horses in these areas.

“I’d avoid stabling or working with horses where flying foxes congregate, such as near or under fruit-bearing trees or camp trees.

“Flying foxes are mobile and move around. Horse owners need to be vigilant and prevent their horses from accessing areas where flying foxes feed or camp. This might mean fencing off some areas on a temporary or permanent basis.

“Also be careful when feeding horses; don’t put cut apples, molasses or anything else attractive to flying-foxes in feed, and don’t leave it out overnight. It might be best not to leave horse feeders out overnight at all in areas where flying foxes are active.

If you spot anything unusual, call the emergency disease hotline on **1800 675 888**

### ***Personal Biosecurity***

Horse handlers should take personal biosecurity precautions when flying-foxes are locally active. Dr Smyth suggests:

- Watch for flying-fox activity
- Avoid direct contact with all horse secretions (nasal, oral and ocular and urine) and manure at all times
- Use gloves, face masks and safety glasses or a face shield, wear full length protective clothing
- Change clothing if it becomes soiled
- Look out for any respiratory distress, frothy nasal discharge, elevated heart rate and temperature, or anything else unusual (including changes in horse behaviour)

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“At all times, if a vet is coming to a property to inspect a sick horse, they should be warned beforehand of the potential for contact with flying foxes so they can take the appropriate precautions.

“Hendra virus is a very uncommon disease in horses and people, but very dangerous if you become exposed. We need to be aware of the risks, and be prepared to implement the appropriate biosecurity precautions.

“Lack of knowledge about HeV is just one example where there is a significant deficiency in funding for horse research in Australia.”

### *Take preventative measures*

Animal Health Australia suggests that all people who may handle or work near horses understand and follow basic measures for the prevention, identification and control of all infectious disease of horses, including Hendra virus.

AHA Manager, Biosecurity Planning and Implementation, Duncan Rowland, says that general biosecurity measures should be a part of the regular daily routine. He nominates a checklist:

- Thoroughly check the health of all horses before they enter your property
- Feed animals away from areas that may be frequented by pest or wild animals, including flying foxes
- Secure water sources to ensure they are not contaminated by faeces, particularly by flying foxes
- Always handle sick horses last and use separate protective clothing and footwear between horses.

Mr Rowland says additional and specific biosecurity measures can reduce potential impacts:

- Isolate horses from other horses at the first sign of sickness and until the problem has been identified.
- Wear protective clothing when in contact with any horses showing signs of Hendra virus infection and restrict human access to all horses and the property until a diagnosis is made.

Hendra virus is a notifiable disease and if suspected, you must call your veterinarian, state or territory government animal health authority or the emergency disease hotline on **1800 675 888**.

For more information: <http://www.farmbiosecurity.com.au/diseases.cfm>

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