

Hendra Virus – What this means for Horse Owners?

What is Hendra Virus?

In 1994 a Queensland horse trainer, his stablehand and most of his horses suddenly fell ill. They were subsequently tested and a new virus was determined. The name Hendra was used, after the Brisbane suburb it first occurred in.

Cases since February 2011

In the last 17 years, seven people have been confirmed to have been infected with Hendra virus, four of whom have died as a result of the disease.

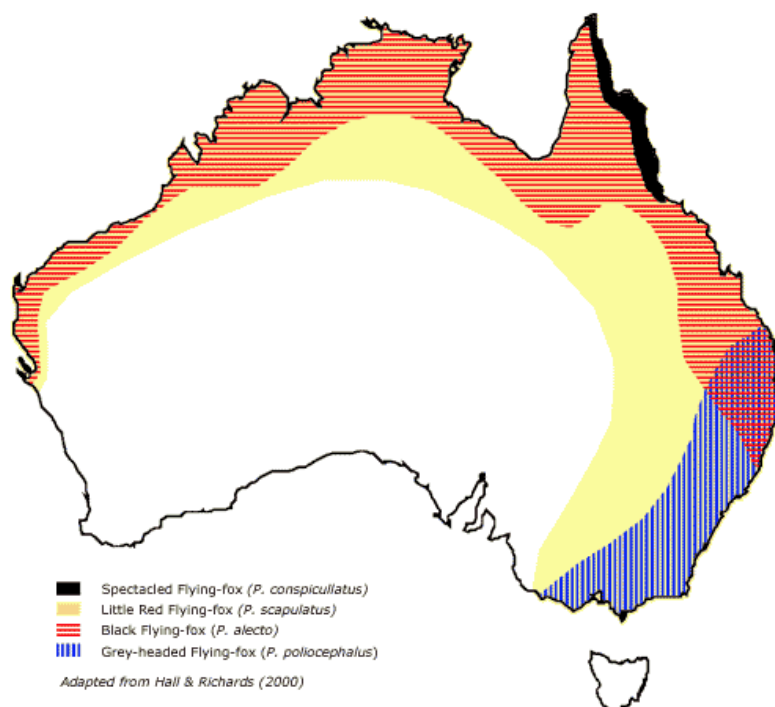
In addition to the initial case in 1994, a farmer from Mackay died in 1995 and two Queensland vets passed away in separate incidents in 2008 and 2009.

There have also been 14 clusters of Hendra virus infection recorded in horses since the virus was first identified. (Agriculture, 2011)

Hendra Virus is carried by fruit bats (flying foxes) that live in Australia, Papua New Guinea and surrounding islands. The fruit bats appear to be unaffected by the virus.

Hendra virus is able to be passed from the bats onto horses, causing severe disease. It then can be passed onto humans that are in close contact with infected horses.

Figure 1: Distribution of Flying Foxes In Australia



(Walker, 2011)

Occurrence of Hendra Virus

Hendra virus can potentially occur wherever there are fruit bats. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of four species of flying foxes.

Symptoms in Horses

The Hendra Virus primarily attacks the cells so that they leak blood and fluid. There are no 'classic' Hendra Virus symptoms. All sick horses should be treated with caution.

Possible symptoms of Hendra Virus

- Rapid onset of illness
- increased body temperature/fever
- increased heart rate
- discomfort/weight shifting between legs
- Depression
- Rapid deterioration

Respiratory signs that include:

- Respiratory distress
- increased respiratory rates
- Nasal discharge at death-can be initially clear progressing to stable white froth and/or stable blood-stained froth.

Neurological signs that include:

- aimless walking in a dazed state
- muscle twitching
- loss of balance, problems getting to feet
- loss of vision in one or both eyes
- head tilting, circling
- muscle twitching
- urinary incontinence
- facial swelling.

(Council, July)

Symptoms in Humans

For humans the symptoms can be flu like illness, which can lead to pneumonia, or inflammation of the brain (encephalitis). Encephalitis can cause confusion, headache, fever and drowsiness. This can lead to convulsions or coma. If you experience any of these symptoms, and your horse has recently become ill, immediately contact your doctor or health professional.

Preventing the Disease

Horses can be infected with the Hendra Virus before they show any symptoms, so it is important for people around horses to exhibit good hygiene practices.

Horse owners can also take precautions by limiting contact between fruit bats and their droppings and their horses. Do not place feed or water supplies in areas where fruit bats may nest. Ensure horses are not in paddocks where the fruit bats may be living. Either remove the horse or fence off affected area.

Other Animals

All domestic animals should be kept away from horses and any areas contaminated by their urine or faeces.

Recently a pet Kelpie was tested positive to the virus in South-East Queensland, and subsequently the dog had to be put down. More information on this case may be found at

<http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/environment/animals/dog-tests-positive-to-hendra-virus-20110726-1hy3p.html>

If you have a horse that is suspected to have Hendra, do not move any other horses off the property until given the all clear.

**If you see these symptoms call your veterinarian or
Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888.
Shower and change clothes if you have handled a sick horse
Stay away from other horses**

Bibliography

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This information was current at time of writing, October 2011.

Photo: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2011/06/30/3257356.htm?site=brisbane>