

Hendra Virus Infection

Description:

Hendra virus infection is a disease caused by the Hendra virus. The virus was first called equine morbillivirus when it was isolated in 1994 from specimens obtained during an outbreak of respiratory and nervous system disease in horses and humans in Hendra in Brisbane.

There have been only six confirmed human infections, all in Queensland, and three of these died. All six cases had been in close contact with sick or dead horses.

Symptoms:

Symptoms in humans have included:

- an influenza-like illness, which can progress to pneumonia; or
- encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) type symptoms i.e. headache, high fever, and drowsiness, which can progress to convulsions or coma.

Horses develop an acute respiratory or neurological syndrome quickly leading to death in most cases.

Transmission:

While Hendra virus does not appear to be very contagious, humans and horses are susceptible to the disease. All human infections have occurred following direct exposure to tissues and secretions from infected or dead horses. There is no evidence of human to human transmission.

The incubation period in humans has been estimated at 5-14 days.

The natural host for Hendra virus in Australia is the flying fox. It is not clear how horses become infected, but this may occur by them eating food contaminated by bat urine or birthing products.

Treatment:

A person suspected to be infected with Hendra virus may need to be admitted to hospital for supportive care such as intravenous therapy and mechanical ventilation. It is not known whether antiviral treatments are effective against Hendra virus infection.

Prevention:

There is no vaccine against Hendra virus. The most important means of preventing Hendra virus infection is to avoid animals that are known to be infected. When contact with potentially infected animals is necessary, take precautions that include using appropriate personal protective equipment and following recommended hygiene and environmental cleaning measures.

Horse feed and water troughs should not be placed under trees where bats may feed or roost.

Any suspected cases in horses or humans should be reported, investigated and treated as soon as possible.

Help and Assistance

For further information please contact your local doctor, community health centre or nearest Population Health Unit.