

## Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

**SAFETY ALERT****Hendra virus – information for veterinarians****Purpose**

Hendra virus is a rare disease of horses and humans that can cause serious and life threatening illness. Human infection results from close contact with infected horses and their blood, body fluids and tissues. Veterinarians and veterinary nurses are particularly at risk of exposure to Hendra virus and this creates important workplace health and safety considerations for veterinarians and their staff.

**Risk**

Hendra virus has the potential to be a serious zoonotic disease for which stringent biosecurity, workplace health and safety and infection control measures are necessary. Hendra virus prevention requires careful professional risk management including safe systems of work, staff training and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Evidence from previous Hendra virus incidents<sup>1</sup> and Hendra virus research<sup>2</sup> indicates that infected horses can potentially excrete Hendra virus through their nasopharyngeal secretions before showing clinical signs of illness, and that by the time an infected horse is showing clinical illness there may be systemic spread of Hendra virus throughout the horse's blood, body fluids and tissues.

You should ensure the precautionary principle and adopt veterinary standard precautions for infection control for all contact with horses. You should also be aware that certain routine equine procedures that are invasive, involve close contact with blood and body fluids and/or involve the respiratory tract

may increase your risk, and you should ensure additional precautions as indicated by your professional risk assessment. You should also ensure early diagnostic consideration of Hendra virus based on known clinical indicators and ensure additional precautions to protect yourself, your staff and others whenever uncertainty exists, and whenever Hendra virus is suspected or confirmed.

**Prevention**

Workplace health and safety precautions for Hendra virus are detailed in the Biosecurity Queensland [Guidelines for veterinarians handling potential Hendra virus infection in horses](#). Following these guidelines will assist you to prevent or minimise the risk of exposure to Hendra virus for yourself, your workers and others.

Workplace health and safety precautions for Hendra virus include the following key elements:

- Develop a plan for responding to a suspect or confirmed Hendra virus case including the minimisation of risk to veterinarians, veterinary nurses, and other persons (including veterinary students and clients) and train workers in the implementation of this plan.
- Ensure workplace health and safety precautions including appropriate infection control practices for use in routine situations. This is the primary defence to protect veterinarians and their staff from exposure to Hendra virus in the pre-clinical phase when infected horses may shed Hendra virus but appear clinically normal.

- Ensure early diagnostic consideration of Hendra virus and implement appropriate response procedures; do not wait for confirmation of diagnosis.
- Ensure high standards of hygiene including hand hygiene, clinic and stable hygiene.
- Ensure safe systems of work for the use, handling, transport, reprocessing and/or disposal of equipment, laundry, clinical waste, sharps and pathology specimens.
- Provide and use appropriate PPE and provide training if this PPE is not routinely used at your practice. PPE may include:
  - gloves
  - overalls
  - boot covers
  - facial shields
  - safety eyewear
  - respiratory protective devices.
- The minimum level of respiratory protection for exposure to bio-aerosols is a P2 particulate respirator and it is important to note that surgical masks do not provide respiratory protection. The correct fitting of a respirator is important because airborne infectious agents can enter the breathing zone if the facial seal is compromised. It is therefore essential that a fit check is done when putting on a respirator to ensure the integrity of the facial seal. In addition, respirator fit testing can be used to determine the brand and size of the respirator that is best suited to an individual's facial characteristics. Veterinarians who regularly care for horses should conduct respirator fit testing to ensure that they and their workers know which respirator will best protect them. You should contact your local supplier for more information about respirator selection, fit checking and fit testing. Be aware of heat stress when wearing PPE and take steps to prevent it.
- To minimise the risk of being caught on a property with no prior suspicion of Hendra virus, consider having a dedicated Hendra virus field kit which includes:
  - appropriate PPE

- hand cleansers
- cleaning agents
- disinfectants
- waste disposal bags.
- The kit should include sufficient supplies for people assisting the veterinarian.

In addition, ensure that you exercise appropriate biosecurity controls when visiting properties, and provide biosecurity information to clients when you have a suspect case. Further information on biosecurity can be obtained from Biosecurity Queensland by phoning 13 25 23 or contacting your local Biosecurity Queensland Service Centre.

### Notification

Occupationally acquired zoonoses must be notified as a work-caused illness to Workplace Health and Safety Queensland. More information on [reporting incidents](#) is available at [www.worksafe.qld.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au).

### Further information

For more information on workplace health and safety relating to occupational diseases, visit [www.worksafe.qld.gov.au](http://www.worksafe.qld.gov.au) or contact the WHS Infoline on 1300 369 915.

[Complete the self-survey for managing occupation Hendra virus risks for veterinarian practices](#) (PDF, 55 kb) For more information on Hendra virus in horses, contact Biosecurity Queensland at [www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au) or 13 25 23.

For more information on Hendra virus in humans, contact Queensland Health at [www.health.qld.gov.au](http://www.health.qld.gov.au) or 13HEALTH (13 43 25 84).

### Reference

1. Perkins, N. 2008, Independent Review of Hendra Virus Cases [www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au).
2. Middleton, D. 2009, Initial experimental characterisation of HeV (Redland Bay 2008) infection in horses. [www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au).

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