



Flying-foxes and Hendra virus – Advice for Horse Owners

Dr Mary Carr, PIRSA Biosecurity – Animal Health

Small colonies of Grey-headed Flying-foxes, commonly known as fruit bats, have recently been sighted in South Australia.

In Queensland and northern NSW Flying-foxes are known to carry Hendra virus which can pose a risk to horses. To date, there have been no reports of Hendra virus in South Australia.

This fact sheet provides information and advice to horse owners on how to minimise the risks associated with flying-foxes and Hendra Virus.

What is Hendra virus?

It is an extremely uncommon virus that can cause fatal disease in people and horses. The virus is carried by some flying foxes (fruit bats) but does not cause disease in these animals. Horses can become infected when in close contact with an infected flying fox.

The virus can multiply rapidly in horses resulting in large amounts of virus being excreted in nasal secretions, urine and faeces. All known human cases have resulted from very close contact between the person and an infected horse. Veterinarians and their hospital staff are a particularly high risk group. There have been no known cases of people becoming infected directly from flying foxes.

Hendra virus has been detected on or east of the Great Dividing Range from Northern Queensland to Northern New South Wales.

What are the risks?

It is extremely unlikely that a case of Hendra virus will occur in South Australia.

The normal habitat for flying foxes does not include South Australia although there have been some recent sightings of flying foxes in the state, including the south east and areas in urban Adelaide.

There has never been a case of Hendra virus reported in South Australia.

What are the risks for horses being transported into SA?

There is an extremely small chance that a horse could become infected in QLD or NSW and then transported into South Australia before clinical signs become apparent. The incubation period (the time from infection to becoming sick) is 5 to 16 days.

The clinical signs of Hendra virus infection are very vague. Any horse that has been recently transported (three weeks) into South Australia from Queensland or NSW with the following signs should be considered suspicious for Hendra virus:

- acute onset illness
- depression, not eating
- discomfort/ weight shifting between legs
- increased body temperature
- increased heart rate
- rapid progression of illness (or death)

While neurological signs (including abnormal muscle twitching, weakness and loss of balance) and respiratory signs (nasal discharge, coughing, breathing difficulty) are the most common signs they are not always seen.

Any sick horses should be examined by your private veterinarian, who will work with PIRSA Biosecurity to arrange exclusion testing for Hendra virus infection if required. The use of appropriate personal protective equipment during this examination is essential.

How can I reduce these risks?

The following steps can be taken to reduce the risk to your horses:

- Place feed and water containers under cover if possible.
- Do not place feed and water containers under trees, particularly if flying foxes are attracted to those trees.
- Do not use feed that might be attractive to flying foxes if they are known to be in the area. For example fruit and vegetables or anything sweet, such as molasses.
- If possible, remove horses from paddocks where flowering trees have resulted in a temporary surge in flying fox numbers. Return the horses after the trees have stopped flowering.
- If removal of horses from paddocks is not possible, try to temporarily remove your horses during times of peak flying fox activity (usually at dusk and during the night).
- Wash your hands with soap and water regularly during and after handling multiple horses.
- Keep any sick horses isolated from other horses, people and animals until you have obtained a veterinary opinion.
- Do not allow visiting horse practitioners (farriers, etc) to work on sick horses. They should only work on healthy horses.
- If there is more than one horse on your property, handle unaffected horses first and then only handle sick horses after taking appropriate precautions.
- Make sure gear exposed to any body fluids from horses is cleaned and disinfected before it is used on other horses. This includes things like halters, lead ropes and twitches. Talk to your vet about cleaning agents and disinfectants to use.

- Seek veterinary advice before bringing any sick horse back to your property.

As a horse owner, what personal safety precautions should I take?

Human infections can occur when handling Hendra Virus infected horses (both live and dead horses). Contact with suspect horses should be avoided until a veterinarian has investigated and provided advice on handling affected horses safely.

If contact occurs, the contaminated skin should be washed thoroughly with soap and water, ideally by taking a shower. Any cuts or abrasions that become exposed or contaminated should also be cleansed thoroughly with soap and water. If available, an antiseptic with viracidal action such as povidone-iodine, iodine tincture, aqueous iodine solution or alcohol (ethanol) should be applied after washing. Medical advice should also be sought from your local doctor.

All suspected cases must be reported

Hendra virus is a notifiable disease. Under South Australian legislation, if you suspect the presence of this disease in horses, you must report it to PIRSA Biosecurity – Animal Health.

To report, please call the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline 1800 675 888. You'll be put into contact with PIRSA Biosecurity Animal staff who will give detailed advice on how to proceed.

For further advice:

Mary Carr, PIRSA Biosecurity – Animal Health, 08 8207 7872

Additional information

- Horse and Donkey Biosecurity – DAFF
www.daff.gov.au/animal-plant-health/pests-diseases/weeds/biosecurity/animal_biosecurity/biosecurity_and_horses
- Queensland DPI Hendra virus website
www.dpi.qld.gov.au/4790_2900.htm

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