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DON'T FORGET ABOUT HENDRA VIRUS – SHOULD YOU VACCINATE?

Cases of Hendra virus have recently been confirmed as far south as Kempsey on the mid north coast so it is no longer just a Queensland problem! While cases so far have been confined to Queensland and northern New South Wales, the virus has been found in flying foxes outside these areas so it is possible that the virus will continue to spread further south.

Hendra virus is a potentially deadly disease of horses that first appeared in Australia about 20 years ago. Flying foxes are the natural host or carrier and they shed the virus in their bodily fluids (urine; faeces; saliva; birth fluids). If a horse ingests these infected fluids (e.g. from contaminated feed or pasture) they may develop the disease. Once a horse has Hendra, the virus can be spread from horse to horse and from horse to people by direct contact with body fluids from the infected horse (saliva; nasal discharge; blood etc.). Unfortunately horses can shed the virus in their body for three days before the onset of clinical signs. Therefore it is wise to practice good hygiene and biosecurity measures at all times – always wash your hands after handling your horse.

There are no physical signs or symptoms that definitively say that a horse has Hendra virus – common signs include depression, fever, increased heart rate and discomfort/weight shifting. Infected horses will then rapidly deteriorate and develop respiratory signs (nasal discharge; difficulty breathing) and/or neurological signs (wobbly gait; altered consciousness; head tilt; muscle twitching). If you suspect a Hendra case, keep all animals and people away from the horse. Contact your vet immediately, stating your suspicion of Hendra. Shower and change your clothes if you have handled the sick horse.

Most vaccinations are designed to keep the vaccinated person or animal free from potentially life-threatening disease (e.g. measles in people; pulpy kidney in sheep; tetanus in cattle etc). The Hendra virus vaccine protects horses, but importantly can also save people's lives by breaking the transmission cycle so that horses do not spread the disease to people.

Due to the devastating consequences of infection with Hendra virus (for horses and more importantly people), the development and commercial production of the Hendra vaccine has been fast-tracked. As a result, the government department that regulates veterinary medicines (Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority) has put a number of conditions on the use of the Hendra vaccine.

Unlike many other vaccinations for cattle, sheep and horses, the Hendra virus vaccine can ONLY be administered by an accredited veterinarian. Each horse that is vaccinated MUST be microchipped as the details of all vaccinated horses are recorded in a national database.

There is no cure for Hendra virus so prevention is the key. Vaccination is the single best way to prevent your horse from catching Hendra virus. Events where large numbers of horses gather are likely to require proof of Hendra vaccination to avoid inadvertent spread of the disease. If Hendra virus becomes established in our area, vets will be within their rights to decline to see any horse (sick or not) that is not vaccinated – the risk to our health is just too great.

Other steps that should be taken to minimise the risk of you or your horse catching Hendra virus include: protecting your horse's water and food sources from contamination by flying foxes; not planting trees that attract flying foxes in or near horse paddocks; isolating sick horses from other horses, animals and people; using good hygiene and cleaning practices; and using personal protective equipment (gloves; overalls; face shields/masks, safety glasses) when dealing with a potentially infected horse.

Horses require two doses of the Hendra virus vaccine given 3-6 weeks apart. Approximately 3 weeks after the second dose they will be protected from infection. Research is still being conducted to work out how frequently booster doses will be required in order to maintain immunity but at present six-monthly boosters are recommended.

Hendra is a rare but deadly disease. It is wise to be aware of the symptoms and preventative measures. By being alert, but not alarmed we can keep ourselves and our horses safe.

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