

Flying foxes and Hendra virus - information for the community

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Flying foxes – general information

Flying foxes are complex, highly social and mobile native animals. They make a significant contribution to environmental health and the economy through their role as essential pollinators and seed dispersers for native forest.

In turn, these forests provide valuable timber, act as carbon sinks, and stabilise our river systems and water catchments.

Queensland has four native species of flying-fox: grey-headed flying fox, black flying fox, little red flying-fox and spectacled flying fox.

Flying foxes and Hendra virus

Hendra virus is a sporadic cause of disease in people and horses. Although the disease can be transmitted from horses to humans, there is no evidence that it can be transmitted directly from flying foxes to humans.

The virus was first isolated in 1994 from an outbreak of disease in horses at a stable in the suburb of Hendra, Brisbane. To date, a total of 14 incidents have been recorded - 13 in Queensland and one in NSW.

Since it was first isolated, seven cases of human infection have been recorded of which four have been fatal.

Flying foxes are a natural host for Hendra virus. The spread of Hendra virus from flying foxes to horses is not yet fully understood. However, the virus has been found in the urine, placental material, aborted foetuses and birthing fluids of flying foxes.

Ongoing research is continually increasing our knowledge about this disease.

Protection of people

There is no evidence of human-to-human or flying fox-to-human spread of Hendra virus. All human infections have been the result of very close contact with infected horses, in particular direct exposure to tissues and secretions from infected or dead horses.

People are urged to be extremely vigilant if their horse displays rapid onset of clinical signs including raised temperature, respiratory distress and/or neurological signs. In this case, horse owners should contact their local veterinarian for further advice.

For further information

Contact the Queensland Health Hotline on 13 Health (432584) if you have concerns about possible exposure of people to Hendra virus.

Protection of horses

Flying foxes often visit properties where native eucalypts, bottlebrushes, lilly-pillies, figs and melaleucas are flowering.

Blossoms are their primary source of food. They will also feed on palm seeds and exotic fruits when native food is less abundant. Horse owners should follow these steps to protect their 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. Fruit and vegetables (e.g. apples, carrots) or anything sweet (e.g. molasses) may attract flying foxes.
- If possible, remove horses from paddocks where flowering or fruiting trees have resulted in a temporary surge in flying fox

numbers. Return the horses after the trees have stopped flowering or fruiting.

- If removal of horses from paddocks is not possible, restrict their access to the areas where the flying foxes are active and for the period of time they are present (e.g. under trees while flowers and fruit are present).

It is vitally important to follow good biosecurity and hygiene practices even if you do not know of flying fox colonies in the area.

Control of flying foxes

Any unauthorised attempts to disturb flying fox colonies are not only illegal but also ineffective. Flying foxes are very mobile animals. They are found in many areas of Queensland. They occupy daytime campsites which vary in location from rivers, creeks and streams to gullies and mangroves areas and some species regularly move camps, following food sources such as flowering trees. They fly many kilometres between the camps and their night-time feeding sites.

There has been much debate about the role of flying foxes in this disease; however culling flying foxes is not an effective way to reduce Hendra virus risk, for a number of reasons:

- Flying foxes are an important part of our natural environment.
- Flying foxes are widespread in Australia and as they are highly mobile it is not feasible to cull them.
- There are far more effective steps people can take to reduce the risk of Hendra virus infection in horses and humans.
- Culling flying foxes could make the problem worse by further stressing them and causing increased excretion of the virus.

More information

For more information visit the Department of Environment and Resource Management website at <http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/> or call 1300 130 372.

Notify suspected Hendra virus cases by contacting Biosecurity Queensland on 13 25 23 (during business hours) or the Emergency Animal Disease Watch Hotline on 1800 675 888 (24-hour

hotline). More information is available at www.biosecurity.qld.gov.au.

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