

Hendra virus - horse carcass disposal

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Animal Biosecurity, NSW DPI.

What is Hendra Virus

Hendra Virus occurs naturally in flying foxes in Australia. Occasionally unvaccinated horses get infected with Hendra virus as a result of feed or water contamination by flying foxes.

Around 100 horses have died from the infection over the past 20 years, mostly along the east coast from the mid north coast of NSW north to Cape York.

But Hendra virus is also a dangerous human health hazard. Four people have died from contact with infected horses since the disease was first discovered in 1994.

An effective vaccine to protect horses against Hendra virus infection is available; horses need regular boosters to maintain protection.

Risk from an unvaccinated sick or dead horse?

Hendra virus infection is often suspected to have caused sickness or death in unvaccinated horses. The suspect horse is a potential source of infection for people and other animals. They need to be treated as suspect cases until Hendra virus testing is completed (following sampling by a veterinarian).

Hendra virus infection in horses can mimic many other horse problems or diseases. Symptoms of infection include:

- colic like signs where horses are unsettled and may roll and sweat a lot.
- nervous signs such as circling, staggering, depression, star gazing.
- serious breathing problems that look like that seen with severe pneumonia or Crofton weed poisoning
- sudden death.

How long does it take to get test results?

Results of testing usually take at least 48 hours and longer if sampled on weekends when transportation is more difficult.

During this waiting period a decision has to be made about what to do with the carcass. In hot weather the carcass deteriorates very quickly and in built up areas, odours can be quite an issue. Contamination of water supplies by the decaying carcass can also be an issue in some instances.

Disposal options for a suspect carcass

The safest option is usually to leave the carcass in situ and cover it with a tarp without touching the body until the results of testing come back. The tarp should be pegged down to prevent access by other animals or birds.

While covering the body with a tarp it is not necessary to use gloves if you do not touch the horse's skin. If direct skin contact is made with the horse while covering it, the contact areas should be washed with soap or disinfectant.

If the test result is negative the horse can be buried without any major biosecurity risk.

If the test is positive a veterinarian from Local Lands Services will normally supervise the burial to ensure the biosecurity risks are minimised.

What if I need to dispose of the carcass before the results are back?

If you don't have a negative Hendra virus test result on an unvaccinated horse you need to treat it as potentially infected. When burying or burning the carcass you need to take care to avoid any contact with the carcass.

The most common method of disposal is to use a machine (excavator or backhoe) to deep bury the horse. It is best for the machine to dig a deep hole next to the body and use the bucket to move the carcass into the hole and cover it with around two metres of soil.

Horses may die in locations that are unsuitable for burial such as high water tables, along water courses or dams and around buildings where access may be limited. In these instances the carcass may need to be moved to a preferred burial site.

Machines with large buckets may be able to pick the carcass up with the bucket. Frequently the machine is unable to move the carcass directly and a rope or chain has to be attached to the body to assist in the movement. Placing a large leak proof bag around the head prevents leakage of potentially infectious body fluids.

When attaching chains or ropes handle the carcass as little as possible and always use gloves. Disposal can then proceed as described above.

Cleaning and disinfection

Hendra virus is easily killed by most disinfectants. Wash off dirt, mud and organic matter first so the disinfectant will work effectively.

If you contact the carcass or body fluids wash all exposed skin with soap or disinfectant.

If your clothing is contaminated, soak it in disinfectant for at least 30 minutes and then wash as normal. Wash dirt off your boots/footwear then spray with a disinfectant.

If you use chains or ropes etc., soak them in a bucket of disinfectant.

Heavy machinery should be hosed down to remove mud, dirt or other organic matter. Take care not to use high pressure that sprays material back onto the operator.

Spray down any part of the machine that has come in contact with the carcass or body fluids.

Summary

In the vast majority of cases the test result will be negative but taking these biosecurity and hygiene precautions gives you peace of mind in case the result turns up positive.

More information

[Hendra Virus NSW DPI webpage.](#)

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