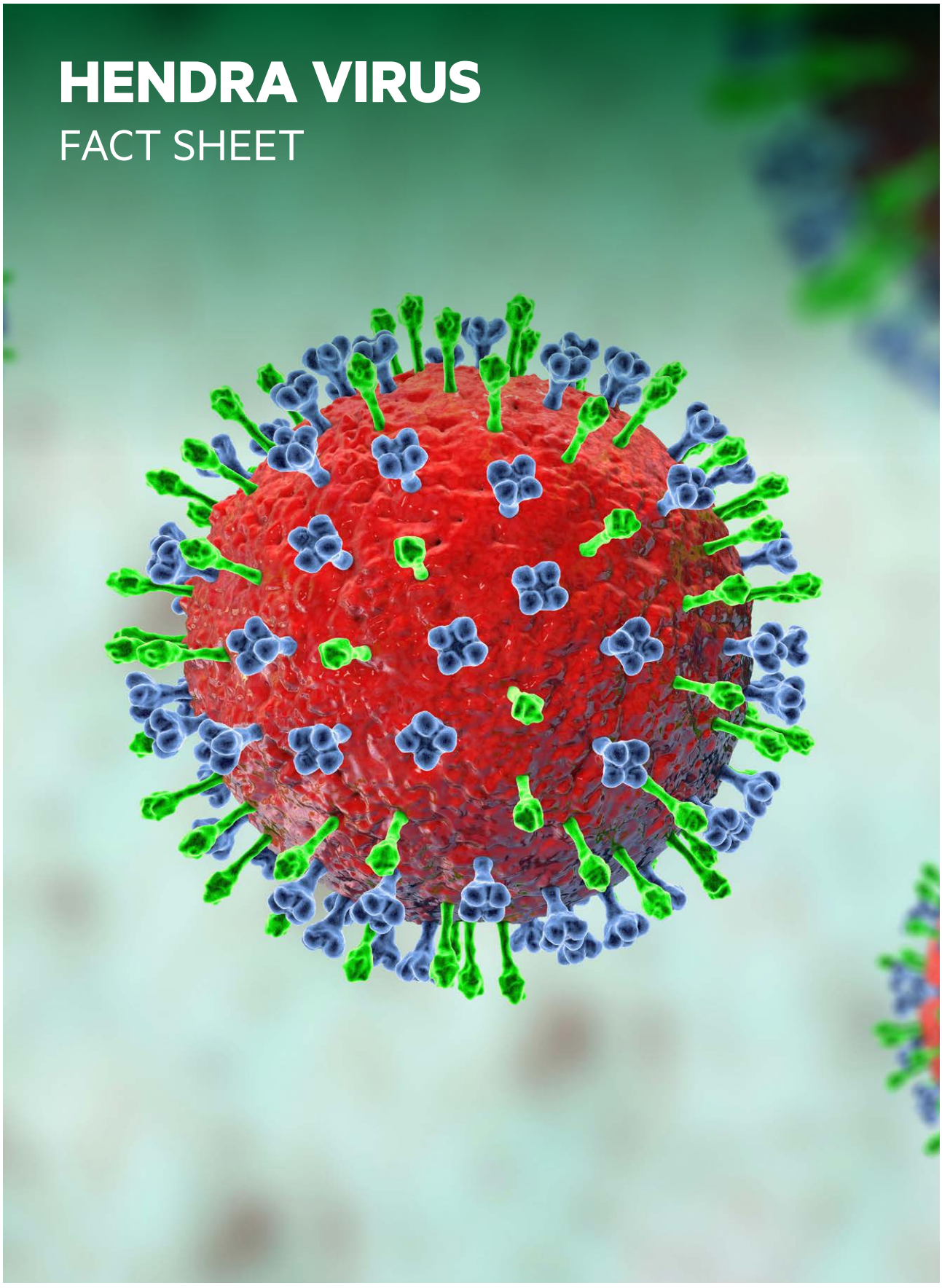
QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

HENDRA VIRUS

FACT SHEET



Q26-027

Queensland Government

WHAT IS HENDRA VIRUS?

Hendra virus is a zoonotic disease caused by a virus called *Henipavirus hendraense*. It can be transmitted from horses to humans.

Hendra virus has only been reported in Australia. It was first identified in 1994 in the Brisbane suburb of Hendra following an outbreak in horses and humans.

Natural hosts

Australian flying-foxes (*Pteropus* spp.), commonly called fruit bats, are the natural reservoir hosts.

How is it spread?

Infection is spread to humans through direct contact with infected horses. Horses may contract the virus from pasture, feed or water sources contaminated with infected flying-fox body fluids or excretions. Direct transmission from flying-foxes to humans has not been demonstrated.

Horse-to-human transmission by direct contact may occur when someone:

- has high-level exposure to respiratory secretions or other body fluids, faeces, urine or blood from an infected horse
- observes or assists with horse births, coming into contact with infected birthing fluids (tissue, placenta, blood, mucus)
- conducts a post-mortem examination of an infected horse.

There is no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Low-level contact with a sick horse, such as patting or feeding, does not appear to be a risk. Two dogs have been infected with Hendra virus by horses, but there is no evidence of bat-to-dog or dog-to-human transmission.

Flying-foxes are protected native species that play a vital role in our ecosystems, pollinating native flora, dispersing seeds through their droppings, providing habitat and food for other animals and helping maintain ecosystem balance and biodiversity.

Who is at risk?

- Vets and vet nurses, horse owners and breeders, farmers, animal transporters and animal refuge workers.
- People who have close contact with an infected horse without wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) are most at risk.

Yes – you can still touch your pet horse and dog!



What are the symptoms?

In animals

Flying-foxes infected with Hendra virus usually do not show any symptoms. Horses with Hendra virus can show rapid onset of symptoms, including fever, increased heart rate, difficulty breathing and colic. Rapid progression to death is accompanied by further respiratory or neurological (nervous system) symptoms.

In humans

Symptoms typically develop 5–21 days after contact with an infectious horse.

Initial symptoms may include:

- fever
- cough
- sore throat
- headache
- tiredness.

The disease might then progress to more serious illness, causing symptoms such as:

- severe pneumonia
- breathing difficulties (rapid or laboured breathing)
- confusion, dizziness and drowsiness
- muscle twitching, stumbling or head tilting

- meningitis or encephalitis (inflammation of the brain)
- convulsions and coma.

⚠ Hendra virus infection is very rare but can be fatal.

How can I prevent infection?

While the greatest risk to humans is from sick horses, infected horses can shed Hendra virus for a few days before they show any sign of illness. No human vaccine is currently available for Hendra virus, but one is available for horses. Vaccinating horses is strongly encouraged as it is the single most effective way to reduce the risk of exposure to Hendra virus.

Other ways to prevent the spread of Hendra virus include:

- Protect horse feed and water from contamination by flying-fox fluids.
- Isolate sick horses from other horses, people and pets (especially dogs).
- Use good hygiene practices around horses. Wash hands thoroughly with soapy water after touching horses and before eating or drinking, especially after handling your horse's mouth or nose (e.g. fitting or removing a bridle) and before touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Shower and change clothes and shoes after contact with horses.
- Don't kiss horses on the muzzle, especially if the horse is sick.
- If body fluids or manure from a horse touch unprotected skin, the area should be washed with soap and water as soon as possible.
- Wear personal protective equipment (PPE) if in close contact with a sick horse or when assisting with equine births or post-mortem examinations.

ⓘ Playing or walking near flying-fox roosting areas does not pose a risk of Hendra virus if the animals are not handled.

What treatments are available?

There is no specific treatment for Hendra virus infection and cases are treated supportively in hospital. Intensive care might be required.

If you think you may have been exposed to Hendra virus, please contact your doctor or public health agency for further advice.

Cover: Computer illustration of the Hendra virus. Courtesy: Alamy/Science Photo Library
Page 2: A flying-fox in Redcliffe Botanic Gardens, Queensland. Courtesy: Alamy/Kevin Dickinson

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