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Introduction

Nipah virus caused zoonotic problems in Malaysia in 1998-99 but has since been detected in other Asian countries. Originally Nipah virus moved from bats to pigs and then on to man.

The virus

Nipah virus is a paramyxovirus and is a close relative of the Hendra virus. This virus represents a serious risk to human public health and in the original outbreak killed many pig farmers and farm workers. Sometimes outbreaks of infection are seen in man where there is no link to pigs.

The disease

This virus is highly contagious among pigs and transmission is assumed to be via secretions from infected pigs and possible airborne spread. In the Malaysian outbreak the movement of infected pigs played an important role in the spread of this disease, including its spread to abattoir workers in Singapore.

Nipah virus primarily targets the vascular, nervous and lymphoreticular systems.

Clinical signs

Disease (encephalitis) and death in humans may be the first signs of an outbreak.

Nipah virus infection in pigs can be asymptomatic or be an acute febrile disease with respiratory and/or nervous signs. Signs are age dependent but there are no pathognomonic clinical signs although a 'barking' cough is often associated with Nipah virus infection.

Nervous signs include muscle tremor, hindquarter weakness, varying degrees of spastic paralysis, an uncoordinated or 'drunken' gait, head pressing and agitation.

The commonest clinical sign is a severe cough.

Lesions

There is no pathognomonic lesion.

Treatment

As Nipah virus is a serious zoonotic pathogen, treatment should not be considered.