



NT Health

NT on alert for Japanese encephalitis

7 June 2022

Northern Territory residents and visitors are being reminded to protect themselves from mosquito bites following an increase in the number of feral pigs that have tested positive for Japanese encephalitis (JE) in the Top End region.

Since March 2022, 44 feral pigs infected with JE have been detected in the Victoria Daly, Litchfield, Marrakai-Douglas Daly and Cox-Daly region, as well as the Tiwi Islands.

Nina Kurucz, Director of the Medical Entomology Unit, NT Health, said JE is a serious disease spread by mosquitoes that can infect humans and animals, such as pigs, horses and some birds.

"The highest risk period for being bitten by an infected mosquito is after sundown within five kilometres of wetlands where feral pigs and water birds potentially infected with JE are present," Ms Kurucz said.

"The best way to prevent JE and other mosquito-borne viruses is to avoid getting bitten. It is recommended people wear protective light-coloured clothing with long sleeves, long trousers and socks in areas where mosquito bites are likely. People should also use a protective repellent containing DEET, picaridin or oil of lemon eucalypt."

The Northern Territory Government and the Australian Government's Northern Australia Quarantine Strategy (NAQS) have partnered to undertake ongoing JE surveillance activity across the Top End region.

Strategies include working with staff from the Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade (DITT) to monitor feral and domestic animal populations such as pigs and horses for signs of JE, in addition to the mosquito surveillance program managed by NT Health.

To date, no domestic pigs or mosquitoes in the NT have tested positive to JE.

“While JE can potentially be fatal, it is not transmitted from person to person or from eating infected pork meat,” Ms Kurucz said.

“Most people with JE will be asymptomatic but, on rare occasions, it can result in severe disease and even death. Symptoms can include fever, headache, neck stiffness, vomiting, confusion, seizures and paralysis.

“People who believe they may be infected with the JE virus should seek urgent medical assistance.”

The Northern Territory’s Chief Veterinary Officer, Dr Sue Fitzpatrick, said DITT has been working with property owners who have had feral pigs with JE detected on or near their properties.

“JE is a notifiable disease, so animal owners, vets, hunters, landholders and the public should report suspicious or unusual signs in animals to the Emergency Animal Disease Watch hotline on 1800 675 888,” Dr Fitzpatrick said.

“The department has provided free testing for registered domestic pigs, and also taken samples from feral pigs to understand the current area of risk for JE infection.

“We’re working with our colleagues at NAQS on an ongoing surveillance program, and are urging people to report unexplained pig miscarriages, stillbirths or neurological signs in young piglets. Horse owners are also asked to report any cases of neurological signs in horses, so that we can test for JE.”

While there is no specific treatment for JE, a vaccine is available. It is important everyone take steps to avoid mosquito bites, such as:

- Wear protective light-coloured clothing with long sleeves, long trousers and socks in areas where mosquito bites are likely;
- Avoid outdoor exposure near wetlands and flooded areas, especially after sundown;
- Use a protective repellent containing DEET, picaridin or oil of lemon eucalypt (PMD) and other mosquito protection devices;
- Ensure infants and children are adequately protected against mosquito bites;
- Consider insecticide barrier treatments by pest control companies for use around residential grounds;
- Ensure windows and doors have screens to prevent mosquitoes from entering houses.

More information about JE is available on the Australian Government Department of Health [website](#). Additional information is available from the NT Health Medical Entomology team on 08 8922 8510.

Further details about JE in animals, including signs of the disease, are available online [here](#).

ENDS.

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