

JAPANESE ENCEPHALITIS ALERT

Information for NSW General Practitioners

Please distribute this information to all staff



Health

Key points for GPs:

1. Japanese encephalitis is a mosquito-borne viral illness which has been detected in pigs for the first time in NSW.
2. People living in NSW regions where pigs are farmed and mosquito numbers are high may be at risk.
3. Consider the diagnosis in patients presenting with fever, headache and signs of encephalitis.
4. Encourage all your patients to protect themselves from mosquito bites.

Background

Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV) is transmitted to humans and other animals by the bite of infected mosquitoes. JEV has been recently been detected for the first time in pigs in NSW. Pigs are important in JEV transmission because pigs develop high levels of viraemia sufficient to infect mosquitoes (amplifying host), whereas mosquitoes do not become infected from biting infected humans. Culex mosquitoes which are common in NSW are able to transmit this infection. There is no risk from contact with pork products or consumption of pork.

Less than 1% of infected people experience clinical disease. Symptoms arise between 5 and 15 days after being bitten by an infected mosquito and include fever and headache, variably accompanied by neck stiffness, disorientation, tremors, coma, convulsions & paralysis. For cases who develop encephalitis the case fatality rate is 20%-30%. Of those who survive almost half experience neurologic, cognitive or psychiatric sequelae.

There is no specific treatment for Japanese encephalitis. Effective vaccines are available but are not included in the National Immunisation Program.

What parts of NSW are affected?

- Japanese encephalitis was confirmed in a number of piggeries in rural NSW, Victoria and Queensland in late February. The extent of the risk to humans is not yet known.
- Several people who recently visited south western NSW are being investigated for Japanese encephalitis but are not confirmed at this point.
- Kunjin, a mosquito-borne viral illnesses with similar presentation to JEV and related to West Nile virus, has been detected in horses in NSW. Ross River & Barmah Forest viruses have been detected in humans.

Patient investigation

- If patients present with symptoms of encephalitis, include Japanese encephalitis in your differential diagnosis if they live or have visited rural areas, especially if they were near pig farms or report being bitten by mosquitoes.
- Refer patients with suspected Japanese encephalitis to hospital for management and further investigation (as per alert 002/22 issued through the NSW Health Safety Alert Broadcast System).

Vaccination

- Vaccination is recommended for workers and residents on farms with confirmed cases of JEV among pigs.
- At this time, it is not recommended that NSW GPs consider Japanese encephalitis vaccination for other groups in the community. Vaccination advice will be updated as more information arises on which populations in NSW may be at increased risk.

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Further Information:

http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/japanese_encephalitis.aspx