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Disease find a key to Hendra

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A NEW virus closely related to the deadly Hendra and Nipah viruses has been found in black flying foxes at Cedar Grove near Beaudesert.

The find by CSIRO and Biosecurity Queensland has excited scientists because it could help them unravel secrets of Hendra and Nipah viruses.

The viruses kill more than 70 per cent of humans and animals they infect, yet little is known about how they interact with their hosts.

There are no concerns about the new virus infecting humans, although it can't be ruled out.

Gary Crameri, a CSIRO virologist at the Australian Animal Health Laboratory in Geelong, said bats carried more viruses than other species, perhaps because they were such a broad group of ancient mammals, ranging from micro-bats weighing a few grams to large flying foxes that lived in many different environments.

Scientists were intrigued why they could carry deadly viruses but not become diseased themselves. If this could be worked out, bats could provide humankind with medicines to fight viruses and help weakened immune systems.

"They're an incredibly important group of animals and the risk of the virus spilling over to humans is incredibly low," Mr Crameri said. "Even if it did, it might go unnoticed – perhaps like a gentle cold. All experiments indicate Cedar's nowhere near as deadly as Hendra."

Named for where it was found, the Cedar virus had not caused illness in tests on mice, guinea pigs and ferrets which were susceptible to Hendra and Nipah.

Cedar had caused mild infections in laboratory animals but no signs of disease.

A survey of flying foxes showed 25 per cent had antibodies to Cedar, a similar number to that seen with Hendra.

Researchers were investigating how the virus might impact on domestic animals, including livestock.

Its discovery would have no impact on the development of a Hendra horse vaccine.

CEDAR VIRUS

- Serological evidence shows Cedar virus is widespread
- It is international protocol to name a virus after the location in which it was first found
- Cedar virus has been named after Cedar Grove because that's where the flying fox urine samples containing the virus originated
- Hendra virus was named after the Brisbane suburb where it was discovered in 1994
- Nipah virus was named after one of the villages in Malaysia where it was discovered in 1999
- Where it is found is not important in terms of the virus, its preferred environment or ability to reproduce