

Hantavirus crisis: WHO recommendations

AFP | Geneva, Switzerland

A deadly hantavirus outbreak on a cruise ship has spurred global concern over the potential spread of the virus among and from ship evacuees as they head back to their home countries.

Here are the World Health Organization's main recommendations to limit the transmission risks and to better protect those exposed to the rare virus, which usually spreads among rodents, and for which there is no vaccine or treatment.

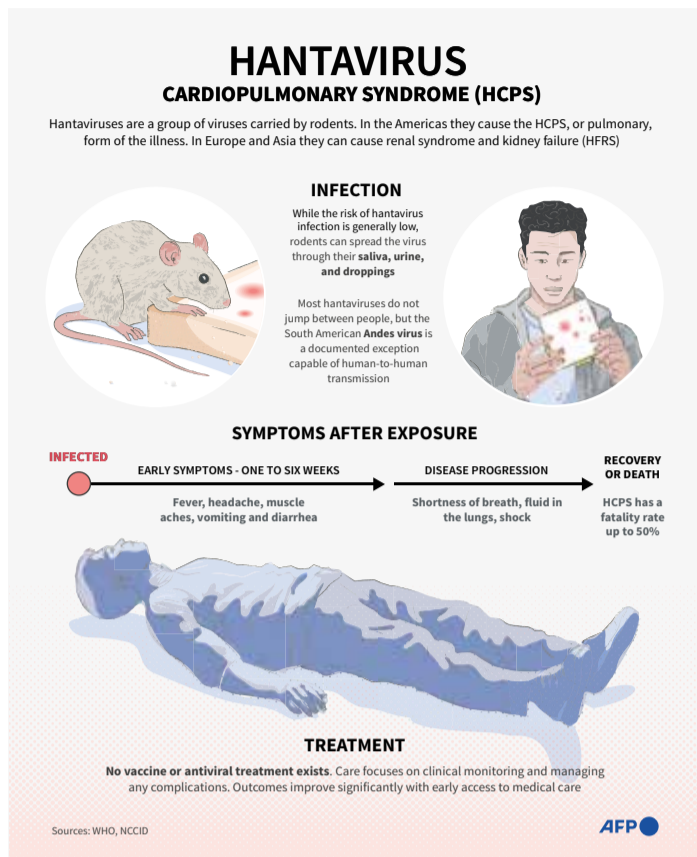
Quarantine

All of the nearly 150 people who were onboard the Dutch-flagged MV Hondius when it arrived early Sunday in the Canary Islands for disembarkment have been classified as "high-risk" contacts, according to the WHO's epidemic and pandemic preparedness and prevention director Maria Van Kerkhove.

The United Nations health agency is recommending that all of them be quarantined and kept in isolation for six weeks.

"For people returning home, our recommendations are active monitoring and follow up and daily checks for symptoms at home or in a specialised facility for the full incubation period of 42 days, after last potential exposure," the WHO told AFP on Monday, adding that it considered that the isolation period started "on 10 May".

"Should any early symptoms or sudden onset of respiratory distress occur, people should



immediately inform health authorities and self-isolate until medical evaluation is conducted," the agency stressed.

Why 42 days? Van Kerkhove said that corresponded to the longest likely incubation period of Andes virus -- the only hantavirus strain known to spread between humans -- at the heart of the outbreak.

Olivier Le Polain, who heads WHO's epidemiology and analytics for response division, stressed that people are "in the first few days, in the first few

moments of illness", which is why it is wise not to wait for symptoms to appear before placing a contact in isolation.

What should countries do?

The WHO has urged countries to strengthen health coordination, contact tracing and surveillance of suspected cases.

The organisation is working with "all of the countries to receive further information about any of the cases that we're following up, any of the

people that might become suspect cases", Van Kerkhove said.

Other people who had left the ship before the outbreak was understood, as well as people they come in contact with could also be considered high-risk contacts.

WHO has said that high-risk contacts "may include cabin mates, intimate partners, persons with prolonged close indoor exposure, healthcare workers with unprotected exposure, and individuals handling contaminated materials or body fluids without appropriate personal protective equipment".

The agency has urged countries to provide "clear and transparent communication to affected individuals and the general public" about the situation.

Various country approaches

Each country chooses what health protocols it wants to put in place, with most following WHO's guidelines.

But in the United States, Jay Bhattacharya, acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), said the 17 returning American passengers would not necessarily be quarantined.

Depending on the estimated risk, passengers can choose to go

home "without exposing other people on the way", he said Sunday.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who was on Tenerife to help supervise the evacuations, said that policy "may have risks".

Several countries, including Germany, Britain, Switzerland and Greece, have opted for a 45-day quarantine.

Australia and France, for their part, have announced minimum observation periods of three and two weeks respectively, which can then be extended.

In healthcare facilities

There is as of now no licensed treatment for hantavirus, which can have a fatality rate up to 50 percent.

But the WHO said "early supportive care and immediate referral to a facility with a complete ICU can

improve survival".

The UN health agency recommends that healthcare facilities systematically apply standard precautions to all patients, including hand hygiene, surface cleaning and waste management.

For the management of suspected or confirmed cases, the WHO recommends implementing additional measures, with particular precautions taken in the case of any procedures likely to generate aerosols.

US passengers from the Dutch flagged hantavirus-stricken cruise ship MV Hondius are transferred by boat to the industrial port of Granadilla de Abona on the island of Tenerife in Spain's Canary Islands



Beatles to open first London museum on site of last gig

AFP | London, United Kingdom

The Beatles' first official London museum is set to open next year in the Mayfair building where the band recorded its final album and played its last gig, Paul McCartney announced Monday.

The attraction -- "The Beatles at 3 Savile Row" -- will feature seven floors of never-seen-before archive material and a recreated basement studio where the Fab Four recorded their 1970 "Let It Be" album.

Visitors to the venue on the upmarket central London block -- better known globally for its traditional bespoke tailors -- will also get access to its rooftop where the band staged an iconic performance in 1969.

"Tourists come to England and they can go to Abbey Road, but they can't go inside... so I thought this was a terrific idea," McCartney told the BBC.

The 83-year-old pop legend said it stemmed from efforts by Apple Corps -- the company which has overseen the band's business interests since 1968 -- to reexamine "what the Beatles mean, and what people want these days from us".

The company previously owned the Savile Row building for eight years from 1968 and it served as the band's headquarters for two years prior to their 1970 break-up and for business



The Beatles during their famous rooftop performance in London in 1969, which became their final public live performance.

purposes afterwards.

"We're thrilled to bring Apple Corps back to its spiritual home and give The Beatles fans something truly special," its CEO Tom Greene said in a statement.

"Every single day, fans are taking pictures of the outside of 3 Savile Row, he added.

"But next year they can go in and explore all seven floors of the iconic building, including the rooftop where even the railings remain the same from that famous day in 1969."

Footage of the famous January 30, 1969, concert -- the last time anyone saw the Fab Four

perform publicly -- was recently restored and included in Peter Jackson's "Get Back" documentary about the band.

Speaking to the BBC, McCartney said visitors will ascend the Savile Row building and see "various things" including memorabilia before they can "pretend to be a Beatle" on the roof.

It will also feature rotating exhibitions and a fan store, according to Apple Corps.

"There are so many special memories within the walls, not to mention the rooftop," McCartney added in the official

statement.

Ringo Starr, 85, the only other living Beatle, called the exhibition "like coming home".

Apple Corps promised further details about it, and a second experience currently in development, in "due course".

In the meantime fans can register for tickets on the band's website.

The band's hometown of Liverpool, in northwest England, already boasts two attractions -- Liverpool Beatles Museum and The Beatles Story -- but neither are officially licensed by Apple Corps.

Turkey-Syria border gate to reopen after 12-year closure

● The crossing, which lies just over the border from Tal Abyad in northern Syria, was closed by Turkey in 2014

AFP | Istanbul, Turkey

One of the border crossings between Turkey and Syria is to reopen on Tuesday, ending a 12-year closure, local officials said Monday.

The reopening of the Akcakale crossing, which sits roughly in the middle of Turkey's 900-kilometre (550-mile) border with Syria, is the latest step in Damascus's move towards normalisation with its neighbours.

The crossing, which lies just over the border from Tal Abyad in northern Syria, was closed by Turkey in 2014 after the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) took over the town following the defeat of Islamic State group militants.

Turkey has long viewed the SDF as linked to the Kurdish militant PKK and a major threat along its southern border.

It was partially reopened in 2019 for trade, funerals and the crossing of government officials after a Turkish military operation against IS jihadists

and Kurdish fighters.

The decision will now mean the crossing is open to civilians.

"In light of the normalisation of life in the region... entry and exit procedures using passports to and from the Syrian Arab Republic via the Akcakale Land Border Crossing will start on Tuesday," the Sanliurfa governor's office said in a statement.

The move will mean six of the 12 crossings between Turkey and Syria will be open.

Turkey has forged close ties with Syria's new rulers, with President Ahmed al-Sharaa joining a diplomacy forum in Turkey's southern Antalya resort in April.



Turkey closed several key border gates with Syria during the Syrian civil war, and by 2018 had completed a 764-km border wall -- one of the world's longest security barriers.