NIH Renews Veterinary Researchers' $2M Grant to Study Hepatitis E

More than 20 million people worldwide contract the virus every year, which can be passed from animals to humans.

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The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has renewed a five-year $2 million grant for the study of hepatitis E virus (HEV), an understudied and sometimes fatal liver disease that can travel from animals to humans, Science Magazine reports.

The renewal is a major win for professor of molecular biology X.J. Meng, PhD, and his team of researchers at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine who have for decades sought to better understand the risks and treatments for HEV. Though significantly less common than hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV), 20 million people worldwide contract HEV, which causes more than 44,000 deaths per year.

The virus, which is most prevalent in low-income and developing countries, has garnered attention in recent years for two major reasons: 1) it's gaining prevalence among immunocompromised people around the world; and 2) the incredibly high mortality rate (up to 25%) among pregnant women with the virus.

Researchers don't know why the virus is so deadly in expectant women. However, Meng and his team had already discovered that the virus could be passed on to humans by pigs, chickens and a dozen other animals that have been identified as reservoirs for the virus. These findings alone had intensified public health concerns about the potential for future foodborne and zootonic (animal-to-human) infections.

In 2007, Meng and his team discovered that nearly 11% of pig livers sold in the United States tested positive for hepatitis E contamination, meaning they could infect humans if served undercooked. Since then, the team has helped design more effective strategies for preventing cross-species hepatitis E infection, while seeking to better understand the genetics of the virus generally.

With this new influx of cash, scientists say they plan to examine why HEV claims so many deaths among pregnant women and learn more about how to prevent and treat the virus in women at risk.

This is the third time researchers at Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine have secured a renewal from the NIH. To learn more about hepatitis E and how it affects humans, click here.

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