U.S. Renews Support of Hep E Research

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 pass from animals to humans.

Researchers at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine 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 annually, which causes more than 44,000 deaths per year.

Hep E, 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, they 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, researchers discovered that nearly 11% of pig livers sold in the United States tested HEV positive, meaning they could infect humans if served undercooked.

Since then, researchers have helped design more effective strategies for preventing cross-species hep E infection while seeking to better understand the genetics of the virus.

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