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# Hantavirus on MV Hondius: India's Surveillance Response and the VRDL Network

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CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

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# Hantavirus on MV Hondius: India's Surveillance Response and the VRDL Network

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## WHY IN NEWS

The **World Health Organization** and the **US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)** issued international alerts in early May 2026 about a **Hantavirus cluster aboard the expedition cruise ship MV Hondius** in the Atlantic Ocean. Eight cases and three deaths had been reported by May 8, 2026, with six lab-confirmed as **Andes virus (ANDV)**. Two **Indian nationals** were on board. Through May 11, 2026, the **National Institute of Virology (ICMR-NIV)** confirmed that both Indians remained **asymptomatic** and under observation, and that India faced “**no immediate public health threat.**”

## WHAT IS HANTAVIRUS?

**Hantaviruses** are a group of rodent-borne RNA viruses of the family *Hantaviridae* (order *Bunyvirales*). They cause two principal human syndromes:

SYNDROME	REGION	LETHALITY	KEY STRAINS
<b>HPS</b> (Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome)	Americas	35-40%	Sin Nombre virus, <b>Andes virus (ANDV)</b>
<b>HFRS</b> (Haemorrhagic Fever with Renal Syndrome)	Eurasia	0.1-15%	Hantaan, Seoul, Puumala, Dobrava

## Transmission

- **Primary route:** Inhalation of aerosolised excreta (urine, faeces, saliva) of infected rodents – mainly of the family **Sigmodontinae** in the Americas and **Muridae** in Eurasia
- **Bite-transmission:** Rare but documented
- **Person-to-person spread:** Documented **only for Andes virus (ANDV)** in Argentina and Chile – exceptional among hantaviruses
- **No vaccine** is approved for hantavirus disease anywhere

## Incubation and Symptoms

- Incubation: 1-8 weeks (typically 2-4 weeks)
- Initial: fever, myalgia, fatigue, headache
- HPS: progresses to pulmonary oedema and respiratory failure – requires ventilation
- HFRS: kidney involvement, hypotension, haemorrhage

## THE MV HONDIUS OUTBREAK

PARAMETER	DETAIL
<b>Vessel</b>	MV Hondius – a Dutch-flagged Polar Class expedition cruise ship operated by Oceanwide Expeditions
<b>Region</b>	Atlantic Ocean (southern Atlantic itinerary near sub-Antarctic islands and Argentine ports)
<b>Cases (as of May 8, 2026)</b>	8
<b>Deaths</b>	3
<b>Confirmed strain</b>	Andes virus (ANDV) – 6 lab-confirmed
<b>Indian nationals aboard</b>	2 – both asymptomatic; under observation
<b>WHO alert</b>	Issued under International Health Regulations, 2005
<b>US CDC</b>	Issued advisory for travellers

Andes virus exposure on a sub-Antarctic itinerary likely involved port stops where wild rodents accessed cargo or food stores. Investigations into the exact transmission node are ongoing.

## INDIA'S SURVEILLANCE RESPONSE

### 1. Coordination

The **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare** through **NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control)** activated standard international-arrivals screening protocols. Information has been shared with State Surveillance Officers under the **Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP)** of the **Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)**.

## 2. Diagnostic Architecture: The VRDL Network

The **Viral Research and Diagnostic Laboratory (VRDL) network** is India's frontline molecular diagnostic infrastructure:

- **Established** by the Department of Health Research (DHR) under MoHFW
- **Coordinated by** ICMR-NIV Pune (apex)
- **165+ VRDLs** spread across all states; tiered as Apex, Regional, and State VRDLs
- **Capability:** RT-PCR and serology for over 35 viral pathogens including hantaviruses, Nipah, Crimean-Congo, dengue, chikungunya, JE, SARS-CoV-2

## 3. ICMR-NIV Pune

- India's **apex virology laboratory** – BSL-4 facility
- Established 1952; under ICMR
- Public statement on May 11, 2026: hantavirus strains do circulate in some Indian rodents but documented human cases remain rare; no immediate public health concern from the MV Hondius cluster

## 4. International Health Regulations Compliance

Under **IHR (2005)**, all WHO member states must:

- Designate an **IHR National Focal Point (NFP)** – in India, the NCDC
- Report **Public Health Emergencies of International Concern (PHEIC)** within 24 hours
- Conduct surveillance at airports, seaports, ground crossings

## HANTAVIRUS IN INDIA: WHAT IS KNOWN

- Indian rodents (especially *Rattus* and *Bandicota* species) have been shown to carry hantavirus antibodies in serological surveys
- A few sporadic **human cases of HFRS-like illness** have been reported in southern India (Chennai, Vellore)
- No outbreak has been confirmed; case reports remain isolated
- The Andes virus is **not** known to circulate in India

## PUBLIC HEALTH LESSONS

LESSON	DESCRIPTION
<b>One Health approach</b>	Zoonotic pathogens require coordinated human, animal, and environmental surveillance
<b>VRDL strengthening</b>	The COVID-19 expansion of VRDL capacity is now a national asset for emerging viruses
<b>Port and airport surveillance</b>	International travel and shipping remain primary entry routes for novel pathogens
<b>Rodent control</b>	Standard public health measure – IPM-based control in food storage, ports, and dense urban settings
<b>Risk communication</b>	Avoid panic; provide accurate information through MoHFW and state health departments

## UPSC RELEVANCE

### GS Paper 3 – Science and Technology, Disaster Management

- Emerging infectious diseases; zoonotic spillover
- India’s biosafety and biosecurity architecture
- One Health framework

### GS Paper 2 – Governance, Health

- WHO, International Health Regulations (2005)
- Public health surveillance: IDSP, NCDC, VRDL
- Centre-State coordination on health (health is a State subject)

### Mains Angles

- 1 Discuss the One Health approach as India’s response framework to zoonotic disease threats.
- 2 Evaluate the role of the VRDL network in India’s pandemic preparedness.
- 3 “International Health Regulations 2005 need strengthening in the wake of recent outbreaks.”  
Comment.

## FACTS CORNER – KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### HANTAVIRUS:

Family: Hantaviridae; order Bunyavirales; enveloped negative-sense RNA virus

Causes: HPS (Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome) in Americas; HFRS (Haemorrhagic Fever with Renal Syndrome) in Eurasia

Reservoir: rodents (Sigmodontinae in Americas; Muridae in Eurasia)

Transmission: inhalation of aerosolised rodent excreta; person-to-person spread documented ONLY for Andes virus (ANDV)

No vaccine approved

### MV HONDIUS OUTBREAK:

Dutch Polar Class expedition cruise ship (Oceanwide Expeditions)

8 cases, 3 deaths (as of May 8, 2026); 6 confirmed Andes virus

2 Indian nationals aboard – asymptomatic, under observation (May 11, 2026)

### INDIA'S RESPONSE ARCHITECTURE:

NCDC (under MoHFW) – IHR National Focal Point

ICMR-NIV Pune – apex virology lab; BSL-4; established 1952

VRDL network – 165+ labs; coordinated by ICMR-NIV; under DHR-ICMR

IDSP – Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme; runs syndromic surveillance

International Health Regulations, 2005 – binding WHO framework

### KEY TERMS:

PHEIC = Public Health Emergency of International Concern

BSL-4 = Biosafety Level 4 (highest containment)

One Health = integrated human, animal, environmental health framework

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