

About 40 Passengers Left Hantavirus-Hit Ship as Global Contact Tracing Expands

The World Health Organization now lists seven confirmed or suspected cases, including three deaths, with about 40 passengers disembarked at St. Helena after the first death, prompting contact tracing across multiple countries.

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Health authorities are now trying to trace passengers who left the MV Hondius after the [first death in a suspected hantavirus outbreak aboard the vessel](#), as the case count has risen and the international response widens. While earlier reports focused on six illnesses and three deaths, the World Health Organization's latest formal update lists seven confirmed or suspected cases, including three deaths, and the Associated Press has reported that about 40 passengers previously disembarked at St. Helena.

The MV Hondius, operated by Oceanwide Expeditions, has been at the center of a multi-country public health investigation after severe respiratory illnesses were reported among passengers. WHO said it was notified on May 2 of a cluster of severe acute respiratory illness aboard the Dutch-flagged cruise ship, which was carrying 147 people, including 88 passengers and 59 crew members representing 23 nationalities.

As of WHO's May 4 update, seven cases had been identified, including two laboratory-confirmed hantavirus infections and five suspected cases. Three people had died, one patient was critically ill, and three people were reporting mild symptoms. Illness onset occurred between April 6 and April 28, with symptoms including fever, gastrointestinal illness, rapid progression to pneumonia, acute respiratory distress syndrome, and shock.

The ship departed Ushuaia, Argentina, on April 1 and traveled across the South Atlantic, with stops including mainland Antarctica, South Georgia, Nightingale Island, Tristan da Cunha, Saint Helena, and Ascension Island. WHO said investigators are still working to determine the extent of passenger contact with local wildlife during the voyage or before boarding in Ushuaia.

The new concern is the group of passengers, 40 in total, who left the vessel after the first death. Dutch officials said one of them was the deceased man's wife, who later died after collapsing at the airport in Johannesburg. A Swiss man who left the ship later tested positive for hantavirus, and that authorities in Europe and South Africa are working to trace contacts connected to passengers who disembarked.

Dutch authorities have not confirmed the current whereabouts of all passengers who disembarked. The Guardian also reported that Argentina is investigating potential exposure points linked to the ship's departure from Ushuaia, while travelers from several U.S. states are being monitored after passengers tested positive or became ill.

WHO's case summary said the first patient, an adult male, developed fever, headache, and mild diarrhea on April 6 while aboard the ship. By April 11, he developed respiratory distress and died on board the same day. No microbiological tests were performed. His body was removed from the vessel to Saint Helena on April 24.

The second case was an adult female who was a close contact of the first case. She went ashore at Saint Helena on April 24 with gastrointestinal symptoms, deteriorated during a flight to Johannesburg on April 25, and died after arrival at an emergency department on April 26. WHO said she was later confirmed by PCR testing to have hantavirus infection, and contact tracing for passengers on the flight has begun.

A third adult male became ill on April 24 with fever, shortness of breath, and signs of pneumonia. He was medically evacuated from Ascension to South Africa on April 27 and remains hospitalized in intensive care. WHO said PCR testing confirmed hantavirus infection on May 2, with additional testing ongoing.

A fourth adult female died on May 2 after developing fever and feeling unwell on April 28, with presentation of pneumonia. Three additional suspected cases reported high fever and/or gastrointestinal symptoms and remained on board as medical teams in Cabo Verde evaluated them and collected samples.

Reuters reported that the Hondius has remained near Cape Verde under health restrictions, with passengers confined as medical evacuations and monitoring continued. Three people, including the ship's doctor, were later evacuated for treatment, according to Reuters.

Health officials are also examining the possible source of exposure. Investigators suspect the outbreak may have begun with a Dutch couple who were likely exposed before boarding the ship, possibly while bird-watching near a landfill in Ushuaia, Argentina. The first case developed illness days after the voyage began, and the couple had traveled in South America before boarding, according to WHO.

WHO said hantavirus infection is usually acquired through contact with urine, feces, or saliva from infected rodents. The agency described it as rare but potentially severe and deadly. Although person-to-person spread is uncommon, WHO noted that limited human-to-human transmission has been reported in previous outbreaks involving Andes virus, a specific hantavirus species.

Despite the deaths and continuing investigation, WHO currently assesses the risk to the global population from this event as low. The agency said the outbreak is being managed through coordinated international response, including investigations, isolation and care of cases, medical evacuations, and laboratory testing.

The investigation remains active, with authorities trying to determine where exposure occurred, whether any passengers who left the vessel may require monitoring, and how to safely manage the remaining passengers and crew.