From Uncertainty to Action: Building Clear, Trustworthy Health Communication During a Nipah Virus Outbreak

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BACKGROUND

In January 2026, two healthcare workers in West Bengal, India, were confirmed to be infected with Nipah virus. The cases drew considerable media attention, including speculation about another pandemic and COVID-19-style lockdowns. Some countries also increased screening and surveillance of passengers arriving from the affected area.

Organizations had to decide whether they needed to change travel plans or introduce additional workplace measures. At the same time, many people were learning about Nipah virus for the first time, even though the virus and related henipaviruses had been known for more than 30 years. Clear communication was needed to explain the risk, address uncertainty, and support a measured response.

OUR RESPONSE NEEDED TO…

- Translate evolving evidence into practical guidance.
- Distinguish established facts from uncertainty.
- Align clinical, public health, and operational messaging.
- Support proportionate, evidence-based decisions.

BUILD A MESSAGE HIERARCHY

WHAT IS KNOWN?
Verified facts and the clearest current assessment.

WHAT REMAINS UNCERTAIN?
Information gaps, conflicting reports, and questions requiring further verification.

WHAT TO DO NOW?
Practical prevention and travel guidance.

EVOLUTION OF OUTBREAK AND COMMUNICATION

12 JANUARY
- Two suspected cases (West Bengal state)
- Both were healthcare workers at the same hospital

13 JANUARY
- Nipah virus confirmed
- Both cases hospitalized

16 JANUARY — MEDIA REPORTS
- 120+ contacts reportedly identified in West Bengal state
- Two symptomatic contacts reportedly undergoing testing

19 JANUARY — MEDIA REPORTS
- Media reports cite an additional suspected case
- No corresponding updates from official sources

24 JANUARY — MEDIA REPORTS
- Media reports cite a total of five cases
- No corresponding updates from official sources

25 JANUARY
- Some countries start implementing enhanced screening at entry points

27 JANUARY
- Health authorities confirm only two cases
- 196 contacts identified

29 JANUARY
- World Health Organization releases risk assessment

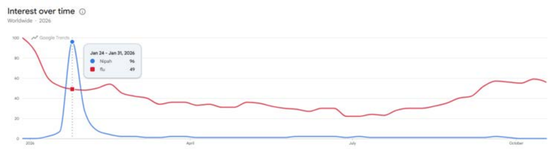


Figure 1. Worldwide Google Trends search interest for *Nipah* and *flu* in 2026. Values are normalized from 0 to 100, with 100 representing peak search popularity during the timeframe. Source: Google Trends (accessed 26 October 2026).

INTERNATIONAL SOS ACTIONS:

Routine monitoring
- Open-source epidemic intelligence and insights from International SOS medical staff in-country.

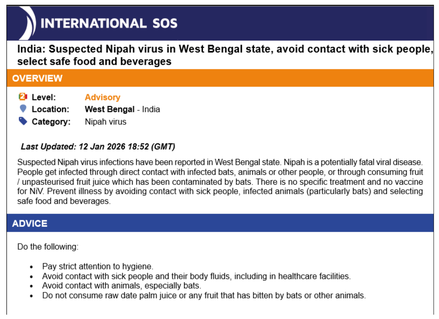
Needs identification
- Incoming inquiries and frontline feedback identified priority questions and shaped the content, level of detail, and format of communications.

Research and verification
- As the situation escalated, we continuously reviewed official updates from local health authorities.

Targeted communications
- Communications scaled with the evolving situation and included medical alerts, increasingly frequent news updates, a briefing document, an infographic, a short video update, and just-in-time Assistance Centre training.

TURNING GUIDANCE INTO USABLE RESOURCES

Medical Alert


INTERNATIONAL SOS

India: Suspected Nipah virus in West Bengal state, avoid contact with sick people, select safe food and beverages

OVERVIEW

Level: Advisory
Location: West Bengal - India
Category: Nipah virus

Last Updated: 12 Jan 2026 18:52 (GMT)

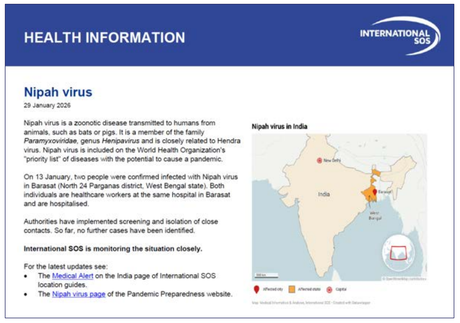
Suspected Nipah virus infections have been reported in West Bengal state. Nipah is a potentially fatal viral disease. People get infected through direct contact with infected bats, animals or other people, or through consuming fruit / unpasteurised fruit juice which has been contaminated by bats. There is no specific treatment and no vaccine for NIV. Prevent illness by avoiding contact with sick people, infected animals (particularly bats) and selecting safe food and beverages.

ADVICE

Do the following:

- Pay strict attention to hygiene.
- Avoid contact with sick people and their body fluids, including in healthcare facilities.
- Avoid contact with animals, especially bats.
- Do not consume raw date palm juice or any fruit that has bitten by bats or other animals.

Briefing Document


HEALTH INFORMATION

INTERNATIONAL SOS

Nipah virus

29 January 2026

Nipah virus is a zoonotic disease transmitted to humans from animals, such as bats or pigs. It is a member of the family *Paramyxoviridae*, genus *Henipavirus* and is closely related to Hendra virus. Nipah virus is included on the World Health Organization's "priority list" of diseases with the potential to cause a pandemic.

On 13 January, two people were confirmed infected with Nipah virus in Barasat (North 24 Parganas district, West Bengal state). Both individuals are healthcare workers at the same hospital in Barasat and are hospitalised.

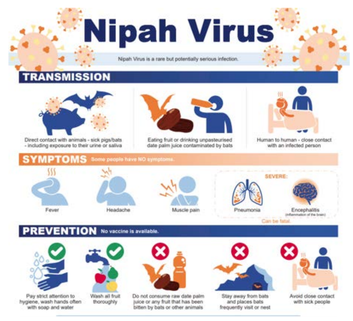
Authorities have implemented screening and isolation of close contacts. So far, no further cases have been identified.

International SOS is monitoring the situation closely.

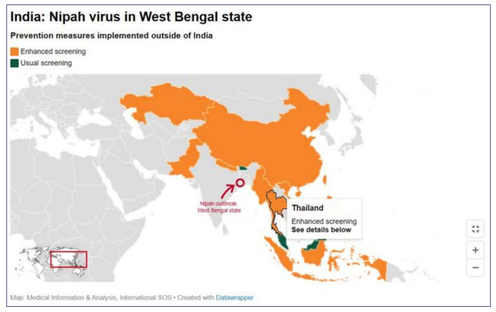
For the latest updates see:
- The Medical Alert on the India page of International SOS location guides.
- The Nipah virus page of the Pandemic Preparedness website.

Nipah virus in India

Infographic



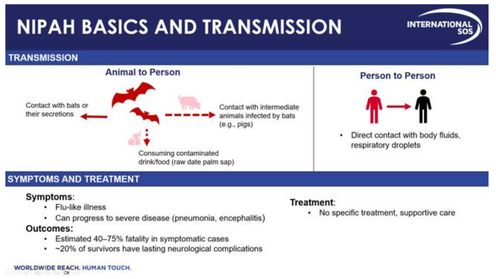
Enhanced Screening Measures



3-Minute Video Update



Just-In-Time Assistance Center Training



FROM UNCERTAINTY TO ACTION

A clear message hierarchy, incoming questions, and frontline feedback helped the team turn evolving information into practical guidance.

Together, these practices supported consistent communication and built trust as the situation evolved.

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