Comparison of hepatitis E virus sequences from humans and swine,
the Netherlands, 2008-2015.

Boris M. Hogema1*, Renate W. Hakze-van der Honing2,3, Michel Molier1, Hans L. Zaaijer1, Wim H.M. van der Poel2,3

1 Sanquin Research, Department of Blood-borne infections, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
2 Wageningen Bioveterinary Research, Wageningen University & Research, Lelystad, The Netherlands
3 Quantitative Veterinary Epidemiology Group, Wageningen University & Research, The Netherlands
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Until the beginning of this century, in the developed world, hepatitis E virus (HEV) was seen
as a travellers disease and autochthonous HEV infection was rarely observed. Now a
days HEV infections become common and recent studies showed that zoonotic hep-
atitis E virus genotype 3 infections occur frequently in industrialized countries. Pigs have
been shown to be a major reservoir of hepatitis E genotype 3 virus, only the transmission
route(s) from pigs to humans are ill-defined. Consumption of undercooked meat prod-
ucts is the likely transmission route however the virus could also spread via surface wa-
ter or crops. Partly orf 1 and orf 2 sequences of HEV isolates were obtained from individu-
al pigs and from blood donors and hepatitis patients. 372 human samples and at least 10
HEV positive caecum swine samples per year were collected in the Netherlands in 2000
and between 2008 and 2015 and sequenced. All generated HEV sequences from human
and pig samples were aligned with a proposed reference set from the literature. In to-
tal, 91 HEV ORF1 sequences and 300 HEV ORF2 sequences from pigs, patients and blood
donors were included in the analysis. Sequence comparison showed that all sequences
were genotype 3 except for six patients (with travel history). HEV gt3c was the most com-
mon subgenotype. Whereas the proportion of gt3c significantly increased between 2000
and 2008 it remained constant between 2008 and 2015. Of the circulating HEV subge-
notypes, there was no difference observed between the human and the pig isolates.
This is compatible with the assumption that HEVs from swine are the major source of HEV
infections in humans. Hepatitis E viruses in humans are very likely to originate from pigs,
but it is unclear why HEV gt3c has become the predominant subtype in the Netherlands.