



## Review

# Sandfly-borne phleboviruses of Eurasia and Africa: Epidemiology, genetic diversity, geographic range, control measures<sup>☆</sup>



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 28 May 2013

Revised 3 July 2013

Accepted 9 July 2013

Available online 19 July 2013

## Keywords:

Sandfly fever

Toscana virus

Arbovirus

Sandflies

Phlebovirus

Bunyavirus

## ABSTRACT

Sandfly-borne phleboviruses may cause a transient febrile illness (sandfly fever) or more severe neuroinvasive disease. In the Old World, they are vectored by phlebotomine flies, which are widely distributed in the Mediterranean basin, North Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and central Asia. High seroprevalence rates have been recorded in humans and domestic animals in areas where sandflies are present. Most published studies have focused on phlebovirus infections of travelers and of soldiers stationed in endemic areas, but the health impact on local populations should not be underestimated, as seroprevalence studies indicate massive circulation of these viruses, even if disease is seldom documented. Except for Toscana virus, which shows a marked neurotropism and is a leading cause of aseptic meningitis in endemic regions, phlebovirus infections are inadequately considered by physicians and are generally underestimated. However, several properties of these viruses suggest that they will extend their geographic range. First, changes in the areas occupied by sandflies as a result of climate change have a direct impact on the epidemiology of associated human and animal diseases. Second, phleboviruses exhibit a high mutation rate, and their tri-segmented genome is prone to reassortment and recombination. Third, distinct virus strains can be transmitted by the same arthropod species. Recent studies have documented the distribution of sandfly-borne phleboviruses in Western Europe, but data for Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa are very limited. With the goal of filling knowledge gaps and planning new research programs, we have examined available information and present it as a comprehensive review, with a specific focus on understudied regions. We also discuss the need to conduct studies aimed at developing new antiviral drugs and vaccines.

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## Contents

1. Introduction	55
2. Phleboviruses and sandflies	56
2.1. The viruses	56
2.2. Sandfly vectors	57
3. Maintenance and transmission	59
4. Discovery of the sandfly-borne phleboviruses	60
4.1. First identification of sandfly fever and early studies	60
4.2. Discovery of Sicilian virus	61
4.3. Discovery of Naples virus	61
4.4. Discovery of Toscana virus	61

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4.5.	Other sandfly-borne phleboviruses	62
5.	Clinical syndromes	62
6.	Experimental studies	63
6.1.	Replication in cell culture	63
6.2.	Infection of laboratory animals	63
6.3.	Human volunteer studies	63
7.	Geographic distribution of the sandfly-borne phleboviruses	63
7.1.	Western Europe	63
7.1.1.	Italy	63
7.1.2.	France	63
7.1.3.	Spain	64
7.1.4.	Portugal	64
7.1.5.	Greece	64
7.2.	Eastern Europe and the Balkans	64
7.2.1.	Croatia	64
7.2.2.	Bosnia-Herzegovina	64
7.2.3.	Serbia	65
7.2.4.	Kosovo	65
7.2.5.	Albania	65
7.3.	Central Asia and other countries in Eastern Europe	65
7.4.	Mediterranean islands	65
7.4.1.	Malta	65
7.4.2.	Cyprus	65
7.5.	Turkey and the near East	65
7.5.1.	Turkey	65
7.5.2.	Israel	66
7.5.3.	Jordan	66
7.5.4.	Saudi Arabia	66
7.5.5.	Kuwait	66
7.6.	North and Central Africa	66
7.6.1.	Morocco	66
7.6.2.	Algeria	66
7.6.3.	Tunisia	66
7.6.4.	Egypt	66
7.6.5.	Sudan	66
7.6.6.	Uganda	67
7.7.	Other African countries	67
7.8.	The Middle East	67
7.8.1.	Iraq	67
7.8.2.	Iran	67
7.8.3.	Afghanistan	67
7.8.4.	Southern Asia	67
7.8.5.	Pakistan	67
7.8.6.	India	67
7.8.7.	Bangladesh	67
7.9.	Potential for further geographic spread	67
8.	Significance for military forces	68
9.	Countermeasures against sandfly-borne phleboviruses	68
9.1.	Vaccines	68
9.2.	Insecticides	69
9.3.	Treatment	69
10.	Potential for further evolution and emergence	69
11.	Directions for future research	70
	Acknowledgements	70
	References	70

## 1. Introduction

Sandfly-borne viruses belong to the genera *Phlebovirus* (family *Bunyaviridae*), *Vesiculovirus* (family *Rhabdoviridae*) and *Orbivirus* (family *Reoviridae*). In this review, we focus on phleboviruses transmitted by sandflies in Eurasia and Africa, which are associated with sandfly vectors that belong to the genus *Phlebotomus*. Sandfly-borne phleboviruses are widely distributed in the Mediterranean region, in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East and central Asia.

Except for Toscana virus, which has a marked tropism for central and peripheral neurological systems, sandfly fevers cause moderately severe disease, and are often given little attention by physicians. There is also much less scientific interest in sandfly-transmitted viral diseases than in other arboviruses. For instance, a PubMed-based bibliographic search using “Toscana virus”, “sandfly virus”, and “sandfly fever virus” retrieved 232, 385, and 265 references, respectively, while searches with the keywords “West Nile virus” and “dengue virus” retrieved more than 4500 and 6000 papers. It is therefore difficult to provide accurate

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