

PREVENT HANTAVIRUS PULMONARY SYNDROME

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

What is Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (also known as HPS)?

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome is a serious, often deadly, respiratory disease that has been found mostly in rural areas of the western United States.

A Hantavirus that is carried by rodents and passed on to humans through infected rodent urine, saliva, or droppings causes the disease.

Should tourists, campers, and hikers worry about Hantavirus infection?

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome is a rare disease, and most tourists are not at increased risk for Hantavirus infection. However, visitors to rural areas and nature resorts - campers, hikers, and others who take part in activities outdoors - can become exposed to rodent urine, saliva, or droppings and can become infected with hantavirus.

What kinds of rodents carry Hantavirus?

The deer mouse is the primary carrier of the virus that causes Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome. This type of rodent is found throughout the United States, except in the Southeast and East Coast. In the Southeast, the cotton rat is known to carry Hantavirus.

How do I identify rodents, burrows, and droppings?

A deer mouse is 4-9 inches long from head to tip of tail. It is pale gray to reddish brown and has white fur on its belly, feet, and underside of the tail. It has oversized ears.

A mouse nest (burrow) is usually a pile of material under which the mouse lives. This pile can contain many different materials, such as twigs, insulation, styrofoam, and grass.

How is the virus spread?

Hantavirus is spread from wild rodents to people. The virus, which is found in rodent urine, saliva, and feces, gets in the air as mist from urine, saliva, or dust from feces. Breathing in the virus is the most common way of becoming infected; however, touching the mouth or nose after handling contaminated materials can also infect you. A rodent's bite can also spread the virus.

Hantavirus is not spread from person to person. You cannot become infected by being near a person who has Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome. The virus, which is able to survive in the environment (for example, in contaminated dirt and dust), can be killed by most household disinfectants, such as bleach or alcohol.

What are the symptoms of Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, and how long after infection do they appear?

Symptoms of Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome usually appear within 2 weeks of infection but can appear as early as 3 days to as late as 6 weeks after infection.

First symptoms are general and flu-like: fever (101-104 degrees); headache; abdominal, joint, and lower back pain; sometimes nausea and vomiting. However, the primary symptom of this disease is difficulty in breathing, which is caused by fluid build-up in the lungs and quickly progresses to an inability to breathe.

What should I do if I think I have Hantavirus infection?

If any combination of the symptoms described above - especially difficulty in breathing - appear after direct or indirect exposure to rodents, contact your doctor or public health clinic immediately and be sure to mention your exposure to rodents.

Is there a cure for or vaccine against Hantavirus infection?

No cure or vaccine is yet available against Hantavirus infection. The sooner after infection medical treatment is sought, the better the chance for recovery.

Is it safe to travel to areas where Hantavirus infection has been reported?

Yes. Travel to and within all areas where Hantavirus infection has been reported is safe. Nevertheless, if you camp or hike in an area inhabited by rodents, you have a small risk of being exposed to infected rodents and becoming infected with Hantavirus.

To minimize the risk for Hantavirus infection, follow these precautions:

- *Before occupying abandoned or unused cabins, open them up to air out.
- *Inspect for rodents and do not use cabins if you find signs of rodent infestation.
- *If you sleep outdoors, check potential campsites for rodent droppings and burrows.
- *Do not disturb rodents, burrows, or dens.
- *Avoid sleeping near woodpiles or garbage areas that may be frequented by rodents.
- *Avoid sleeping on bare ground; use a mat or elevated cots if they are available.
- *Store foods in rodent-proof containers and promptly discard, bury, or burn all garbage.

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