



Hantavirus

What is hantavirus?

Hantavirus refers to a group of viruses carried by rodents, including mice. Certain types of hantaviruses can cause Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS). Though rare, HPS is deadly. There have been no recorded cases of HPS transmission from one person to another. People must acquire the virus directly from mice/rat urine or feces. Hantavirus is very rare in the Boston area.

How is it spread?

Only some types of mice and rats can carry the hantaviruses that cause HPS. In North America, these include the deer mouse, the white-footed mouse, the rice rat, and the cotton rat. Rodents and other pets from pet stores are not known to carry hantavirus.

Since it is difficult to tell if a mouse or rat is carrying the disease, it is best to stay away from all wild mice and rats.

Mice and rats spread the virus in their urine and feces. People can become infected after touching mouse or rat urine, droppings, or nesting materials that contain the virus and then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth. The virus may also spread when dried materials contaminated by rodent feces are disturbed and get into broken skin or the eyes, nose, or mouth. Rarely, people can also get HPS from a mouse or rat bite. Hantavirus cannot spread from person to person.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who comes into contact with rodent urine or feces containing hantavirus is at risk of developing HPS, including people who are otherwise very healthy. Some activities will increase the risk of exposure, such as:

- Cleaning out garages, storage facilities, or barns that were vacant during the winter
- Cleaning a home that may have housed mice or rats
- Working in construction, utility, or pest control jobs
- Hiking and camping in areas where mice or rats may live.

What are the symptoms of Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS)?

Symptoms of HPS may develop 1 to 5 weeks after exposure to a mouse or rat that carried a hantavirus. People may initially experience fever, severe muscle aches, and fatigue. Headaches, dizziness, chills, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach pain may also develop early. Four to ten days after initial illness, cough and shortness of breath may develop.

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What should I do if I think I have HPS?

If you think you may have been exposed to a hantavirus and are experiencing flu-like symptoms in addition to shortness of breath, you should contact your healthcare provider immediately. Early diagnosis of HPD can be difficult because early symptoms can easily be confused with seasonal influenza. Your doctor will ask you about your history of possible contact with mice or rats.

How is it treated?

To date, there is no specific treatment, cure, or vaccine for HPS. If the disease is detected early, supportive treatment can help people recover. The treatment will be less effective once someone is experience more severe symptoms.

How can I prevent HPS?

The best way to prevent HPS is to avoid contact with mice and rats. This includes removing them from your home. Sealing all openings greater than ¼ inch will prevent mice and rats from entering your home. You should remove trash, food sources, and dense shrubbery that are within 100 feet of your home so that mice and rats will not create nests near your home. Store all food and garbage in tightly sealed containers.

How should rodent urine or dropping in a house be cleaned up?

All mouse and rat urine, droppings, and nesting materials should be cleaned with a strong disinfectant or a mixture of bleach and water. Let the area soak for 5 minutes before drying.

Be sure not to sweep or vacuum the urine, droppings, or nests. This will stir the virus particles and cause them to become airborne, which will allow them to be inhaled. Always wear a mask and protective gloves when cleaning materials that may contain mouse or rat urine, droppings, or nesting materials.

How should a dead rodent be disposed of?

Always wear rubber or plastic gloves when handling a dead animal. The dead rodent and surrounding area should be sprayed with a strong disinfectant or mixture of bleach and water. You should allow the animal to soak for 5 minutes before placing it in a tightly sealed plastic bag. Next, place the full bag into another sealed bag and throw it into a trashcan that is regularly emptied. Remember to wash your hands and dispose of the gloves without touching other surfaces.

