

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources Information for the Public - Hantavirus Disease

What is hantavirus disease?

Hantavirus disease is a rare but extremely serious illness caused by a family of viruses known as hantavirus. The first United States cases were diagnosed in the southwestern states in 1993. Hantavirus disease is now being diagnosed in many other parts of the country and several different types of hantavirus have been identified. Hantavirus is carried by infected wild rodents, primarily deer mice. The virus, which is found in the animal's urine, saliva and droppings, gets in the air as mist or dust.

What are the symptoms of hantavirus disease?

The initial symptoms are fever (101-104F), chills and muscle aches. Other common symptoms are headache, cough, nausea or vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain. However, the primary symptom of hantavirus disease is difficulty in breathing which is caused by fluid build-up in the lungs. This can progress to respiratory failure or an inability to breathe. Typically, these respiratory problems develop a few days after the initial symptoms. In some cases of hantavirus disease, the kidneys and other organs will stop working.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually start about two weeks after exposure but the incubation period can be as short as three days or as long as six weeks.

How is the virus spread?

The main way that hantavirus is spread to humans is by breathing air contaminated with rodent urine, droppings or saliva. It can also be transmitted by handling rodents or by touching your nose or mouth after handling contaminated materials. A rodent's bite can also spread the virus. There is no evidence that cats or dogs transmit the disease to humans. You cannot get hantavirus from another person.

Who is at most risk for hantavirus disease?

Persons who have exposure to rodents or rodent-infested areas are at highest risk of getting hantavirus disease.

What is the treatment for hantavirus disease?

At the present time, there is no specific treatment for hantavirus disease. Early intensive hospital care is currently the only known beneficial measure.

How can hantavirus infection be prevented?

1. Keep your home clean to discourage rodents: wash dishes promptly, clean counters and floors, put pet food and water away at night, store food and garbage in containers with tight lids.
2. Prevent mice from entering your house by sealing all openings with caulking or steel wool. Remember rodents can squeeze through holes as small as a dime.
3. Don't stir up and breathe dust. If you are going into a building, garage or basement that has been closed, open it to air out for at least one hour before spending time inside. Wet down dusty areas that may be contaminated with rodent droppings or urine before cleaning them up. You can use a commercial disinfectant such as Lysol spray or prepare a solution of 1 1/2 cups bleach to 1 gallon of water. Use a spray bottle to mist the area and gently but thoroughly wet it. A hard spray will just stir up more dust.
4. Wear rubber or plastic gloves when handling a dead rodent or cleaning an area that has evidence of mice. Dead rodents should be sprayed with disinfectant and then placed in a plastic bag containing enough disinfectant to thoroughly wet the carcasses. When cleanup is complete, seal the bag and place into a second plastic bag before disposing by burying or burning. Before removing gloves, wash gloved hands in disinfectant and then in soap and water. Thoroughly wash hands with soap and water after removing gloves.
5. Control mice outside your house: clear brush and grass away from the foundation, place woodpiles and garbage cans on platforms at least 12 inches off the ground and keep them at least 100 feet from the house, haul away junk that can provide homes for rodents.
6. When camping or sleeping outdoors, avoid disturbing or sleeping near rodent droppings or burrows. Avoid sleeping on bare ground. Use a mat or elevated cot if available. Store foods in rodent-proof containers and promptly discard, bury or burn all garbage.

More information about Hantavirus is available on the World Wide Web at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hanta/hps/index.htm>

*Adapted from fact sheet prepared by the Virginia Department of Health