



Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome

What is Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS)?

HPS is a severe, sometimes fatal, respiratory disease in humans caused by infection with a Hantavirus. Hantavirus is carried by several types of rodents. Canada reports about three cases annually. Health Canada has found the virus in a very small percentage of rodents tested in Northern Ontario. Your chances of getting HPS are very low. It is rare for people exposed to the virus to become infected.

How is HPS spread?

Rodents, especially deer mice, carry the virus. Deer mice are pale grey, with white fur on their stomachs. They live mainly in rural and semi-rural wooded areas. They are not generally found in urban areas.

Infected rodents shed the virus in their urine, saliva and droppings. People can be exposed to the virus in several ways:

- Most often by breathing in virus particles from infected deer mice droppings or urine (this can happen during sweeping, vacuuming or through other actions that raise dust).
- Being bitten by an infected deer mouse.
- Touching any broken skin after contact with infected material.

Person-to-person transmission in North America has not been reported.

Pets and livestock do not catch the virus so these animals cannot pass it on to people.

What symptoms should I watch for?

Symptoms generally begin one to five weeks following exposure. Early symptoms of hantavirus infection include fever, vomiting and diarrhea, headache, dizziness and muscle pain. Some individuals may experience more serious symptoms such as abdominal pain followed by coughing, shortness of breath and difficulty breathing. Severe respiratory failure, resulting in death, can occur within a few days of the early symptoms.

What is the treatment for HPS?

Treatment is symptomatic. Early recognition and medical care can help with recovery.

If you feel you may have been exposed to deer mice or their droppings or are experiencing symptoms, it is advised that you speak with your health care provider immediately.

How do I protect myself and others?

There are no vaccines available for HPS. The key to disease prevention is to become educated on how to prevent rodent infestations, and how to properly clean and disinfect areas contaminated by rodent droppings. All rodent droppings should be treated as potentially harmful.

- Seal up holes and gaps in your home or garage.
- Place traps in and around your home.
- Store human and animal food, water and garbage in containers with tightly fitted lids.
- When cleaning your home, be aware of animal droppings and nesting materials. Do not sweep or vacuum rodent droppings; this will release particles into the air where they can be breathed in. Damp-mop and then wash floors thoroughly.
- Always use disposable or rubber gloves when handling dead rodents and other materials. Dispose of rodents and other materials in a sealed plastic bag.
- Wash gloves in disinfectant and hot soapy water before removing them from your hands and thoroughly wash your hands after removing gloves.
- Open windows/doors for a half-hour before and after cleaning to air out the area.
- Wear a breathing mask if the area is poorly ventilated.
- Wash countertops, drawers and cupboards with disinfectants. Wash any clothing or bedding contaminated with droppings. Dry them in the sun or in a hot dryer.
- After cleaning up, wash hands and face well before eating, drinking or smoking.

For more information call the Infectious Diseases Team:
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