

# Hantavirus

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*This fact sheet provides basic information only. It must not take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Always talk to a healthcare professional about any health concerns you have, and before you make any changes to your diet, lifestyle or treatment.*

## **What is hantavirus?**

Hantavirus infection is a rare but serious, life-threatening illness. It is believed to be caused by breathing in the virus carried by airborne particles of rodent urine, droppings or saliva. The disease does not cause illness in pets and it cannot be passed from person to person or from pets to people.

## **How is it spread?**

In Canada, the primary carrier of the hantavirus is the deer mouse but it is possible that other rodents may sometimes carry the virus. Deer Mice are found in southern and central Yukon. Their numbers peak in late August and early September after early frosts. Hantavirus is mainly spread when mouse droppings, urine or nesting materials are disturbed, sending virus particles into the air where they can be breathed in. In rare cases, it may be spread through small breaks in the skin when handling a wild mouse, or by mouse bites. Domestic pets are not believed to be a source of infection. In North America, there is no evidence that the disease spreads from one person to another. Always wash your hands after touching any rodents or their droppings.

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

Symptoms of HPS will generally occur within 4 to 5 days. HPS begins as a "flu-like" illness. In the early stage of the disease, a person may have a fever, sore muscles, headaches, nausea, vomiting and have shortness of breath. As the disease gets worse, fluid builds up in the lungs, making it harder to breathe. In North America, about 1 out of 3 people with HPS have died.

## **Who is at risk?**

People at higher risk include families living in houses with rodents or who move into a home where rodents were living, as well as campers and hikers visiting areas with rodents. Individuals who clean barns, electricians, plumbers, or others who work in crawl spaces are potentially at greater risk.

## **Is there a treatment for HPS?**

Although there is no specific treatment, medication or cure, many of the symptoms and complications of HPS can be treated. Most patients are admitted to intensive care in a hospital. Some patients may be given anti-viral drugs.

## **How can I protect myself?**

The best way to prevent infection from hantavirus is to avoid contact with rodents and their droppings. Keep mice out of your home and learn how to clean up safely. Breathing protection should be used when entering areas where rodents have been. Wear protective clothing, shoes and gloves that can be disinfected or thrown away.

- Keep it clean. Clean up immediately and store foodstuffs in rodent proof containers.
- Secure your home or camp by ensuring rodents can't get in.
- Ensure the area around your home or cabin is cleared of brush and keep trash at least 100 feet away. Do not leave pet food, water or food dishes out overnight.

- Make sure you wet mop with a bleach solution — do not sweep because dry sweeping raises dust and increases exposure. Mop first.

Avoid all rodents' burrows and dens. Do not use cabins until they have been aired out and disinfected. Pitch tents in areas without rodent droppings. Avoid camping near woodpiles or garbage areas where rodents might live. Use tents with floors or cover ground under sleeping bags. Sleep on elevated cots, if possible. Use only boiled, bottled, filtered or chemically treated water. Store foods in rodent proof containers and promptly discard or burn or bury all garbage. Breathing protection should be used when entering areas where rodents have been. Wear protective clothing, shoes and gloves that can be disinfected or thrown away.

**NOTE: You should contact your local public health office before you clean up the home of someone who has HPS.**

### **Remove mice from your home**

Use spring loaded traps to remove rodents from buildings. Dispose of them in sealed, double plastic garbage bags. Bury garbage bags in a hole 0.5-1m deep, burn them or deposit them in the trash according to local by-laws. Disinfect the traps with bleach and water solution (see below) after dead animals have been removed.

### **Stop mice from getting in your home**

Reduce the amount of rodent shelter, such as thick bushes or wood piles, and food or garbage within 35 meters of your home. Block all holes around the walls, windows, doors and roof of your home.

### **Safely clean areas where mice have been**

- During clean-up, wear an appropriate, well fitting filter mask, rubber gloves, coveralls (easily removable & washable clothing) and goggles. These masks include NIOSH-approved 100 series filters, such as N100, P100, and R100 (formerly called HEPA filters), or a respirator with P100 cartridges. An N95 mask may also be used. A dust mask for insulating or painting is not the same as these specialized masks. Specialized masks are available at safety supply stores and some hardware and home building outlets.
- Prevent stirring up dust when you are cleaning up areas where mice have lived. This includes ventilating any enclosed area for 30 minutes and wetting down the area with household disinfectant before you start. Most general purpose disinfectants and household detergents are effective. Diluted bleach (one part bleach to 10 parts water) can also be used.
- Pour solution carefully onto debris to avoid disturbing any virus present – do not use a sprayer.
- Wipe up droppings, nesting materials and other debris with a paper towel and place in a plastic garbage bag. Avoid sweeping dry floors. Do not vacuum.
- Double bag the contents, seal the bags and bury, burn or place in the trash, according to local bylaws.
- Clean floors, carpets, clothing and bedding, and disinfect counter-tops, cabinets and drawers that have been in contact with mice.
- Wash rubber gloves with disinfectant or soap and water *before removing them*. Wash your hands with soap and water after removing gloves.

**Avoid mice when hiking or camping**

Try not to disturb rodent burrows. Don't use cabins where there are mouse or rat droppings. Keep your food in rodent-proof containers.

**Contact Information**

For more information contact Yukon Communicable Disease Control at 667-8323. #4 Hospital Road, Whitehorse, Yukon

In the communities call toll-free 1-800-661-0408 extension 8323.