

Hantavirus

Frequently Asked Questions

What is hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome is a rare disease caused by the Sin Nombre virus, one of several hantaviruses identified in the Americas. People become infected when they inhale (breathe in) dust contaminated with the virus. The disease was first recognized in the spring and summer of 1993 in the Four Corners area of New Mexico and Arizona. There are between 10 - 50 cases of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome diagnosed in the United States annually. Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome has not been diagnosed in New Jersey.

Who gets hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

Rodent infestation in and around the home remains the primary risk for hantavirus exposure. People who come into contact with rodents that carry the virus can get hantavirus pulmonary syndrome. Most cases occur in the southwestern United States; however some cases have occurred in other parts of the country.

How do people get hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

People are exposed to the virus through direct contact with infected rodents, rodent droppings, nests, or by breathing virus particles from rodent urine, droppings or saliva that have dried and become airborne through wind currents, sweeping of floors, or similar actions. Rodents, mostly mice and rats, get the virus and may or may not show symptoms of the disease. The virus is passed out of their bodies in the saliva and urine.

Hantavirus has not been shown to infect other kinds of animals, such as dogs, cats or farm animals.

What are the symptoms of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

Symptoms appear approximately 2 weeks after exposure to infected rodents or their droppings, with a range of a few days to 6 weeks.

Early symptoms of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome include:

- Tiredness
- Fever
- Muscle aches (especially in the large muscles)
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Chills
- Abdominal pain

These symptoms are followed by difficulty breathing (respiratory distress) and low blood pressure.

People who are ill with hantavirus pulmonary syndrome and do not get help quickly may die. Those that survive recover quickly, though full recovery often takes several months.

How is hantavirus pulmonary syndrome diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects exposure to hantavirus, samples of the patient's blood will be examined.

What is the treatment for hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

Most people with hantavirus pulmonary syndrome are hospitalized and receive respiratory support (oxygen and ventilator assistance) and/or blood pressure support (medication).

How long can hantavirus remain infectious in the environment?

Only active infestations of infected rodents result in conditions that are likely to lead to human hantavirus infection. Although the length of time hantaviruses can remain alive and able to infect other people (infectious period) in the environment varies. The virus may remain infectious for 2 to 3 days at room temperature. Exposure to sunlight will decrease the time of viability and freezing temperatures will increase the time that the virus remains infectious.

Should a person infected with hantavirus pulmonary syndrome be excluded from work or school?

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome in the United States is not spread from person to person.

What are the cleaning recommendations?

For a rodent infested area, cleaning recommendations include:

- Put on rubber, latex or vinyl gloves.
- Do not stir up dust by vacuuming, sweeping, or any other means.
- Thoroughly wet contaminated areas with a bleach solution or household disinfectant. (Bleach solution: Mix 1 and ½ cups of household bleach in 1 gallon of water).
- Once everything is wet, clean contaminated materials with damp disposable towels and then mop or sponge the area with bleach solution or household disinfectant.
- Spray all dead rodents with disinfectant and then put them in two garbage bags, along with all cleaning materials.
- Dispose of rodents and cleaning materials in an appropriate waste disposal system.
- Disinfect gloves with disinfectant or soap and water before taking them off.
- After taking off the gloves, thoroughly wash hands with soap and water (or use a waterless alcohol-based hand rub when soap is not available).

Cleaning recommendations for other household items include:

- Books, papers, and other items that cannot be cleaned with a liquid disinfectant or thrown away, should be left outdoors in the sunlight for several hours or in an indoor area free of rodents for approximately one week before final cleaning. After that time, the virus should no longer be infectious. Wear rubber, latex or vinyl gloves and wipe the items with a cloth moistened with disinfectant.
- Wash clothing or stuffed animals in the washing machine using hot water and regular detergent. Laundry detergent makes the virus harmless. Put laundry in the dryer on a high setting or hang it in the sun to dry.
- Carpets and upholstered furniture can be cleaned with a commercial-grade steam cleaner or shampooer.

How can I protect myself from getting hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

- Keep a clean home, especially the kitchen.
- Wash dishes, clean counters and floor, and keep food covered in rodent-proof containers.

- Keep a tight-fitting lid on garbage, and discard uneaten pet food at the end of the day.
- Set and keep spring-loaded rodent traps near baseboards because rodents tend to run along walls and in tight spaces rather than out in the open.
- Set Environmental Protection Agency-approved rodenticide with bait (also called “covered bait stations”) under plywood or plastic shelter along baseboards.

Where can I get more information on hantavirus pulmonary syndrome?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.