



Hantavirus

General Information

There have been recent cases of Hantavirus infection reported in Alberta, including one fatality. Since 1989, this was the ninth death attributed to Hantavirus among 31 confirmed cases.

Although the only confirmed carrier of the Hantavirus in Canada has been the deer mouse, it is possible that other rodents could carry the virus. As it is not always easy to determine what kind of mouse one is exposed to (particularly when the only evidence is droppings), all rodents should be treated as potential carriers.

This disease remains relatively rare in Canada and the risk it poses to the public is very low. Hantavirus, either in rodents or humans, has never been detected in the NWT. However, as a precaution, and particularly in the spring when people do their spring-cleaning and begin spending more time outdoors NWT residents are advised to take the following basic precautions to keep any risk to a minimum.

Precautions

The main risk of infection comes from being exposed to accumulations of mouse droppings in enclosed areas -- for example, cleaning a garage, shed or cottage where mice may have been living in during the winter months. Hantavirus is passed to humans when they breathe in airborne particles released from the droppings, fresh urine and nesting material of infected rodents. The virus does not appear to cause any illness in pets. Even if they are exposed to the virus, dogs, and cats do not pass the infection on to their owners. The virus is also not passed from one person to another.

- The most effective precaution against infection is to keep rodents out of homes and work areas, and immediately trap any that get in.
- Ventilate enclosed areas before cleaning by opening doors and windows for at least 30 minutes. Stay out of the area while it airs out.
- When you begin cleaning it is important that you **do not** stir up dust by sweeping or vacuuming up droppings, urine, or nesting materials. Soak droppings with disinfectant before you mop them up or pick up with a paper towel. Place them in a sealed bag and bury it, or put it out for removal in garbage cans with tight-fitting lids. Wear rubber gloves to handle the droppings. Rinse the gloves in disinfectant (such as bleach solution or soap and water) before taking them off.



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Do not sweep or use a vacuum cleaner to remove droppings in an enclosed space. People who are likely to be exposed to high levels of contamination or in spaces with little ventilation should wear a mask with a HEPA filter.

Symptoms

If a person is infected with Hantavirus, the disease will appear within one to five weeks of initial exposure. Initial symptoms resemble the flu, including fever, body aches, abdominal problems, but can quickly progress to severe breathing difficulties. Anyone who develops such symptoms and has recently been in an area contaminated by rodents should see a doctor immediately.

Even where its incidence among mice is highest, Hantavirus only rarely infects people who come in contact with it. However, in the few people who develop Hantavirus infection, it can be fatal in one-third of the cases, if left untreated. There is no specific cure but early supportive treatment in an Intensive Care Unit reduces the risk of death.

NWT Situation

Small populations of deer mice have been identified in the southern NWT. Environment and Natural Resources, GNWT, conducts yearly small rodent surveys and in the past samples have been submitted for Hantavirus testing. Hantavirus has not been detected in the NWT up to now.

For more information, contact your regional Environmental Health Office

Hay River: (867) 874-7185

Inuvik: (867) 777-8049

Yellowknife: (867) 669-8979

We also recommend the following web

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

The *deer mouse* is about six inches long to the tip of its tail. It is greyish to light brown on top, with a white belly, large ears, and a furry tail that is white on the underside.

ⁱ Source: News Release, Alberta Health and Wellness, 12 & 18 May 2005.