

Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome

General Information

What is Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS)?

Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS) is a severe illness that is caused by a virus. This rare disease was first described in the Southwestern United States in 1993. It is believed that the virus has been present for a long time, but was only just recently recognized.

The first time HPS was found in Canada was in 1994, when 3 cases were reported in British Columbia. The disease has been reported in all of the United States and Canada but is considered to be extremely rare – only about 300 cases have been reported.

Who can get Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome?

People who live in areas where the virus is present, and who come in close contact with rodent burrows, or are exposed to the saliva, urine or droppings of rodents, are at some risk of catching the virus, although the chances of this happening are extremely low.

How is Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome spread?

The virus is normally found only in rodents, especially Deer Mice, but also rats and other kinds of mice. People get HPS when they breathe in the virus that is found in the urine, saliva or droppings of infected rodents. Always wash your hands after touching any rodents or their droppings.

People at most risk of catching HPS include anyone who frequently handles or is exposed to rodents, such as wildlife biologists and pest exterminators. Others who might be at higher risk would be people who often find themselves working in attics or crawl spaces, or who are involved in cleaning or major renovations of homes that have been infested with rodents. These people should take special precautions during their work, including wearing protective clothing and using masks.

What are the symptoms?

HPS begins as a “flu-like” illness. In the early stage of the disease, a person may have fever, sore muscles, headaches and shortness of breath. As the disease gets worse, fluid builds up in the lungs.

What is the treatment?

Most people require hospitalization and get intensive care. Some people may be given anti-viral drugs.

How can you protect yourself?

For most people, the risk of catching HPS is very low. However, in areas where the virus is thought to be present, certain activities have been connected with HPS infection. These activities include:

- cleaning vacant cabins, barns, and other outbuildings, especially if they are known to be infested with rodents
- trapping or handling rodents
- planting field crops

All these factors can cause dust which can carry the virus if it is present, and infect people who breathe it in.

Clean areas where rodents have lived. To prevent stirring up dust when you are cleaning up areas where rodents have lived, you should ventilate and then spray the area with household disinfectant before you start. Damp mop floors, shampoo carpets, wash clothing and bedding, and disinfect countertops, cabinets and drawers. Avoid raising dust when sweeping or vacuuming.

Getting rid of rats and mice

What harm can rodents cause?

Rats and mice can pose a threat to property and health. They cause building damage by chewing on insulation, sidings, wallboard, etc. They will eat a wide variety of stored food. As well as leaving a mess in your cupboards, rodents will often contaminate food. Rodents can also transmit disease.

What's the best way to get rid of rodents?

Rats and mice breed rapidly, so it is important not to let them get established on your property. The best way to get rid of rodents is by using traps. Buy snap traps and bait with dried fruit or peanut butter mixed with oats or cheese. Be sure that the bait is securely attached to the trap pedal, otherwise the trap may not spring when the food is removed. Set the traps at right angles to the walls where the rodents are known to travel, with the bait side of the trap toward the wall. Wear gloves when disposing of the body of the trapped animal. They should be wrapped in plastic and placed in the garbage.

What if I really need help?

If you have problems, either due to the severity of the infestation or because your rodents prove too clever to catch, then you should hire a pest control company (see the Yellow Pages).