



HANTAVIRUS PULMONARY SYNDROME (HPS)

Frequently Asked Questions

What is hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS)?

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS) is a serious, often deadly, respiratory disease that has been found mostly in rural areas of the western United States. The disease is caused by several hantaviruses that are found in rodent urine, saliva, and excreta. Humans primarily become infected by inhalation of aerosol droplets from rodent-contaminated fluids. The most common hantavirus is called Sin Nombre virus and is spread by the deer mouse.

Who gets HPS?

HPS is a rare disease and most tourists, campers, and hikers are not at increased risk for hantavirus infection. However, visitors to rural areas and remote nature resorts and others who take part in outdoor activities can become exposed to rodent urine, saliva, or droppings and become infected with a hantavirus.

How are hantaviruses spread?

Hantaviruses are spread from wild rodents to people. These viruses, which can be found in rodent urine, saliva, and feces, get in the air as mist from urine and dust from feces. Breathing in the viruses is the most common way of becoming infected; however, you can also become infected by touching your mouth or nose after handling contaminated materials. A rodent bite can also spread the viruses. Hantaviruses endemic to the U.S. are not spread from one person to another. No cases in the U.S. have been caused by being near a person who has HPS. The viruses, which are able to survive in the environment (for example, in contaminated dirt and dust), can be killed by most household disinfectants, such as bleach or alcohol.

What are the symptoms of HPS?

The first symptoms are fever (101-104° F), headache, abdominal pain, joint pain, and lower back pain. These symptoms can be accompanied by nausea and vomiting. However, the primary symptom of the disease is difficulty breathing, which is caused by fluid build-up in the lungs and quickly progresses to severe respiratory distress.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of HPS usually appear within 2 weeks of infection but can appear as early as 3 days to as late as 6 weeks after infection.

What should a person do if they think they have HPS?

If any combination of the symptoms described above – especially difficulty in breathing – appear after direct or indirect exposure to rodents, contact your doctor or public health clinic immediately and be sure to mention your exposure to rodents.

What is the treatment for HPS?

Treatment of patients with HPS remains supportive in nature. Early intensive care is important. No vaccine is available for hantavirus infection. The sooner after infection medical treatment is sought, the better the chance of recovery.

Is it safe to travel to areas where HPS has been reported?

Yes. Travel to and within all areas where hantavirus infection has been reported is safe. Nevertheless, if you camp or hike in an area inhabited by rodents, you have a small risk of being exposed to infected rodents and becoming infected.

How can HPS be prevented?

Following these general precautions will greatly reduce your risk of acquiring hantavirus infection:

- Prevent rodents from entering your home by rodent-proofing.
- Clean up rodent urine and droppings by spraying them with a disinfectant or bleach solution until thoroughly soaked. Wearing gloves, use a paper towel to pick up the urine and droppings. Avoid vacuuming or sweeping dry excreta and nesting materials as this could generate infectious aerosols.
- Before occupying abandoned or unused cabins, open them up and air them out. Inspect them for signs of rodents and do not use cabins if you find signs of rodent infestation.
- If you sleep outdoors, check potential campsites for rodent droppings and burrows.
- Do not disturb rodents, burrows, or dens.
- Avoid sleeping near woodpiles or garbage areas that may be frequented by rodents.
- Avoid sleeping on bare ground; use mats or elevated cots if they are available.
- Store foods in rodent-proof containers and promptly discard, bury, or burn all garbage.
- Do not keep wild rodents as pets.

Where can I get additional information about HPS?

Contact the Georgia Department of Public Health, Epidemiology Section, by email at gaepinfo@dhr.state.ga.us, or visit CDC's All about Hantaviruses website at <http://www.cdc.gov/hantavirus/index.html>.