

Hantavirus Fact Sheet

1) ***What is hantavirus?***

Hantavirus is a disease carried primarily by deer mice that can spread from the mouse, its droppings, urine, or its saliva to people. This is a rare but serious illness.

2) ***Can I be tested to find out if I have hantavirus?***

If you have flu-like symptoms that don't go away as they usually do, see your doctor. A special test may be ordered in this instance; testing is only available if your physician feels it is appropriate.

3) ***What are the symptoms of hantavirus?***

The symptoms of hantavirus are flu-like: a fever up to 104 degrees F (40°C), chills, body aches and troubled breathing. If you have these symptoms, see your doctor immediately and if you have been around deer mice or their droppings and have these symptoms, please tell your doctor so that he or she can arrange testing if it is required. Also, if you have had a high fever for 48 hours after being exposed to deer mice or their droppings, please see your doctor.

4) ***How long does it take for the symptoms to show up?***

Symptoms will most likely appear within two weeks after contact with the mice or their droppings, urine or saliva. In a few cases, the symptoms can appear as far as 45 days after exposure.

5) ***Can children and infants be infected with hantavirus?***

So far, teenagers and adults are the only age groups to have acquired hantavirus.

6) ***Why is this disease hitting now?***

This is not likely a new disease. It may be showing now simply because we have better diagnosis, and so can differentiate it from other viruses, or because people are moving into more and more remote areas, where mice are usually found.

7) ***How can it be prevented?***

There are no vaccines against hantavirus. The only protection is to keep your home or work place as free of deer mice as possible, and to clean up any mouse droppings or urine that you see. There is also a risk if you are bitten by a deer mouse.

8) ***How do I know if it's a deer mouse?***

Deer mice have a white underbelly; regular field mice and voles do not. Deer mice have been trapped in Edmonton homes and outbuildings. However, they are more common in rural areas.

9) ***Do all deer mice carry the virus?***

No. A study in Alberta concluded that only 6 per cent of trapped mice carried hantavirus. However, to be on the safe side, Capital Health suggests you assume all mice and their droppings/urine are infectious.

10) ***What do mouse droppings look like?***

Field mice have droppings that are smooth and pellet shaped, about the size of rice grains. Deer mice have bigger droppings that are brown and rough, and look like un-ground peppercorns. Again, to be on the safe side, assume all mouse droppings are infectious.

- 11) ***Can deer mice or their droppings be tested?***
We do not recommend testing of mice or droppings. Please treat all mice and droppings as being potentially infected.
- 12) ***How can I clean up safely if I see a dead mouse or droppings?***
Hantavirus is breathed in. Small particles in the air are taken into the lungs and that's how the infection is most often acquired. For that reason, the first thing to do to protect yourself is to wet down the droppings or dead mice with a disinfectant or bleach solution, which will prevent the particles from becoming airborne. Use 1½ cups of household bleach per one gallon (four litres) of water (mix it fresh daily because the disinfecting quality of the bleach deteriorates after 24 hours.) Once it is wet down, wear rubber gloves and wipe up the droppings with paper towels or old rags. Put the droppings, the gloves and towels/rags in a plastic bag, and place in the household garbage. You should then clean the area again with the bleach solution just to be safe. Be sure to wash your hands well after the clean-up.
- 13) ***How do I handle a dead mouse?***
Wear rubber gloves, or put your hand inside a plastic bag, pick up the mouse, then turn the bag inside out so that you do not touch the mouse, but it is inside the bag. Wash your hands thoroughly after handling a mouse. If you have taken the mouse out of a trap, wear rubber gloves when re-baiting the trap. If you wish, you can disinfect the trap by cleaning it with hot water (do not use a bleach solution on the trap because the smell will drive mice away).
- 14) ***What about workers constantly exposed to mice or their droppings, such as exterminators or farmers?***
People who deal with deer mice on a regular basis should wear a respirator-type mask that has a filter rating of N100 or greater. For workplace issues only, please call the Workplace Health and Safety number listed on the last page of this hand-out.
- 15) ***What about cats or dogs who chase or eat mice?***
The virus is mostly spread by deer mice. Some cats have been found to carry hantavirus, but it is not known if they are affected by the virus and there is no evidence that cats have spread the disease to humans.
- 16) ***What if a cat or dog gets the droppings on their paws? Can they then spread it to people?***
No. The only recorded cases have come from people who directly touched or handled dead deer mice or their droppings.
- 17) ***How long does the virus last in the droppings or the mice?***
We're not sure; we advise everyone to treat every deer mouse and all mouse droppings as being potentially infected.
- 18) ***What if deer mice have been in wells, or have been nibbling at food?***
Hantavirus can possibly be transmitted this way. If possible, dispose of any food or liquid that mice have come into contact with, and secure the food or water source so that mice cannot get back into it.
- 19) ***Are mice in gardens or compost heaps a risk?***
Hantavirus is most often acquired in enclosed spaces where mice and their droppings are present. The concentration of virus outdoors would be very low, minimizing the risk of breathing it in. You can still use the humus from a well maintained compost because the heat from composting will kill the virus. Any garden fruits or vegetables which have been nibbled on by mice should be thrown out. Wash all fruits and vegetables as you normally do.

20) ***What if I have mice droppings on my lawn?***

If you have mice droppings on your lawn and can't remove them individually, soak the area down thoroughly and regularly with water to keep it wet. When mowing the area it may be helpful to wear a mask.

21) ***Do I need to wear a mask?***

If the area is heavily infested with mice or droppings you may want to wear a high efficiency, particulate respirator mask that has a filter rating of N100 or greater. However, the effectiveness of masks is open to debate. You may be better off getting a professional exterminator to clean it up, and if that's not possible, make absolutely sure the area is thoroughly wet down no matter how infested it is.

22) ***How do I clean carpets or upholstery?***

You can either get them commercially steam-cleaned, or rent a cleaner and rug shampoo yourself. Get rid of the mouse droppings as above, but do not use the bleach solution. Wet the area first with hot water, remove the mouse or droppings, then shampoo (do not use bleach on carpets or upholstery). Make sure you use a commercial rug shampoo to which you have added a household disinfectant such as Lysol. It should not stain the carpet or upholstery. For small spot cleaning, spray the area with a disinfectant solution (not bleach), and wipe up the droppings as above.

23) ***What about clothing or bedding?***

Take bedding or clothing outside and either gently roll the droppings off or pick them off with rubber gloves: do not shake them off! This is how hantavirus is spread. Then wash them as regular laundry and dry them in a dryer or hang them outside in bright sunlight. Clothes worn while cleaning mouse infestation can be handled in the same manner: carefully remove any droppings, then wash and dry .

24) ***What about cleaning hard surfaces?***

Use the disinfectant (e.g. Lysol) on hardwood floors, and the bleach solution on linoleum floors, counters and appliances.

25) ***Will winter cold kill the virus?***

In general, viruses can be frozen, and then still be alive when thawed. Whether a mouse or droppings are frozen or not, treat them as being potentially infectious.

For information regarding **worksite** concerns, please call your nearest office of Alberta Labour, Occupational Health and Safety at 1-800-263-8466.

For more information, please contact your nearest Environmental Public Health Services office.

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