

Hantavirus



Rodents can carry hantavirus and other diseases that spread through urine, droppings, saliva and bites. Workers can be exposed when cleaning or working in areas with rodent activity, especially when dust contaminated with droppings or urine becomes airborne.

In Canada, hantavirus is most common in deer mice, although many field rodents can carry it. Deer mice are found in every province and in the southern regions of the territories. They primarily live in agricultural, rural and semi-rural areas. They often enter buildings searching for food, water and shelter. Climate change and wildfires are disrupting their habitats, pushing them into new areas.

Hantavirus begins with flu-like symptoms, including:

- Fever
- Aches
- Nausea
- Shortness of breath

Symptoms usually appear 14 to 28 days after exposure, but may develop sooner. Without treatment, fluid can build up in the lungs and lead to respiratory failure or death. There is no vaccine or treatment for hantavirus.

The Andes virus, a strain of hantavirus found in South America, is distinct from the strains carried by Canadian rodents. The Andes virus is the only known hantavirus capable of limited human-to-human transmission, generally through close and prolonged contact with an infected person. Health care workers who may interact with a patient with suspected or confirmed Andes virus infection should follow infection prevention and control (IPAC) precautions, including protection against airborne transmission.

Workers at greater risk

Workers at greater risk of exposure to hantavirus include:

- Pest control workers
- Maintenance and custodial workers
- Workers supporting people in infested housing
- Laboratory workers handling mice
- Agricultural workers
- Health care workers

Dealing with and preventing rodent infestations

Only workers properly trained in pest control should be involved in remediating rodent-infested areas and removing nests. The key to protecting workers from disease is to prevent or deter mice and other rodents from entering the working environment.

Workplaces should regularly inspect for:

Entry points

- A mouse can fit through a hole 6mm in diameter. Inspections should include checking the areas around water pipes, air conditioning units and exhaust vents. Inspect exterior doors for damaged door frames and weatherstripping barriers. Don't leave doors and garages propped open, especially at dusk or when it's raining.

Food sources

- Mouse populations will thrive as long as they have easy access to food sources. When mice are present, all efforts must be made not to leave food out or to leave open trash bins of food overnight or when the worksite is unoccupied. Store food in rodent-proof containers. Wash dishes daily. Keep outside trash bins covered and away from the building.

Habitat

- Keep weeds and long grass trimmed near building entrances. Avoid dense vegetation around the building foundation.

Rodent activity

- Take action at the first sign of activity. A female mouse can produce a litter of 3-8 pups in three weeks, with up to 10 litters annually. Inspect and discard any soft furnishings that have signs of rodent activity.

Exposure control plans

Workplaces with recurring problems should develop an exposure control plan.

The plan should include:

- Identifying workers and tasks at risk of exposure
- Educating workers and supervisors on signs of rodent activity and how hantavirus is spread
- Ongoing monitoring of rodent activity
- Ensuring only properly trained workers clean droppings, nests or infested areas
- Providing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Establishing procedures for when to use qualified external pest control services

Health and safety committees and representatives must be actively involved in developing, implementing and reviewing the exposure control plan and worker training.

Cleaning rodent droppings safety

- Don't sweep or vacuum droppings. This can spread contaminated dust.
- Wear gloves and a fitted N-95 respirator.
- Ensure good ventilation.
- Spray droppings and contaminated surfaces with disinfectant and let it soak for at least five minutes, or according to manufacturer instructions.
- Use a single-use towel to remove droppings and dispose of waste in the garbage.
- Disinfect the area again after cleaning.
- Steam clean or shampoo upholstered furniture and carpets.
- Leave non-washable materials in the sun for several hours to kill viruses and bacteria.
- Discard gloves in the garbage and wash hands with soap and water.

Additional protections and training are required for emptying traps and remediating contaminated areas, particularly in restricted spaces like HVAC systems.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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