



NEWS

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July 13, 2007
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For Immediate Release

Health Officials Warn of Exposure, Signs and Symptoms of Hantavirus

Pueblo- In lieu of the recent deaths due to hantavirus, health officials at the Pueblo City-County Health Department warn individuals to avoid exposure to hantavirus when cleaning up cabins, buildings, sheds and barns and know the signs and symptoms of the virus.

“Hantavirus, which causes death in nearly half of the cases, begins with high fever, severe body aches, a headache and vomiting. The onset of these symptoms begins from one week to six weeks after exposure,” stated Dr. Christine Nevin-Woods, executive director at the Pueblo City-County Health Department. She urges individuals to call their physician if they experience any of these symptoms.

She added, “Initially, there are no respiratory symptoms present.” However, within one to five days, the illness quickly progresses to respiratory distress, including a dry cough and difficulty breathing, as the lungs fill with fluid. Symptoms such as a runny nose; sneezing; sinus congestion; and a cough that produces phlegm are not associated with hantavirus infection.

Now is the time when people begin cleaning out barns, garages, storage buildings, sheds, trailers or cabins that have been closed up all winter. Precautions need to be taken before beginning such work, particularly if there are accumulations of mouse droppings and other signs of mice.

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If live mice are still occupying the structure, Nevin-Woods said rodent proofing and control should be done before extensive cleaning efforts. The structures should be ventilated thoroughly and any accumulation of dust, dirt and mouse droppings should be wet down with a mixture of bleach and water before any cleaning begins. Hantavirus is transmitted by inhaling dust contaminated with the virus in a mouse-infected area.

Nevin-Woods emphasized that just vacuuming an area without first wetting it down will not provide the necessary protection.

Nevin-Woods said, "It's important for people to understand that this disease is carried by deer mice, which generally are rural mice, and the individuals who have contracted hantavirus in Colorado have been exposed in rural areas. The small gray house mice commonly found in urban areas don't carry the disease. Deer mice are brown on top and white underneath. They have large ears relative to their head size. House mice on the other hand are all gray and have small ears.

"If you are living or staying in rural areas and have deer mice around, you can assume you and members of your family are at some risk. The more live mice that are present the greater the risk although some people have been infected by directly handling a single mouse," she added.

Nevin-Woods suggested rodent-proofing the home by plugging holes and entry points where mice can get inside; eliminating food sources for rodents; by removing abandoned vehicles and wood, brush and junk piles where rodents hide; and by taking the proper precautions when cleaning up areas infested with mice.

Because no effective treatment exists for the disease, Nevin-Woods emphasized prevention as the key to avoiding hantavirus.

"When hantavirus infection is suspected or confirmed, early admission to a hospital where careful monitoring, treatment of symptoms and supportive therapy can be provided is most important," she said.

Precautions that should be taken to provide protection against Hantavirus include:

- Rodent proof buildings by plugging holes or other mouse entryways. Conduct year-round rodent control, using traps or poisons, or hire a professional exterminator.
- Make home or work areas unattractive to rodents. Keep indoor areas clean, especially kitchens. Store food in rodent-proof containers and properly dispose of garbage in sealed containers. This includes pet, livestock and bird food.
- Remove rodent hiding places such as wood, junk and brush piles. Store firewood at least 100 feet from the house. Keep vegetation around the house well trimmed.

- Use caution when cleaning out enclosed areas such as trailers, cabins, barns or sheds. Open doors or windows to provide good ventilation for 30-to-60 minutes before cleaning out structures. Avoid stirring up dust by watering down areas of mouse infestation with a mixture of bleach and water. A bleach mixture of one cup of bleach per gallon of water is recommended.
- When cleaning thoroughly soak down potentially contaminated areas with the bleach mixture.
- Use rubber gloves to pick up saturated waste, including nesting materials or dead mice. Double bag the waste using plastic bags, and bury or dispose of in an outdoor garbage can or landfill.
- Disinfect gloves with bleach and water before removing. Wash hands afterwards.
- In cases of severe infestation, or when ventilation and dust suppression are not possible, use a rubber face mask equipped with a High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter.
- People camping in rural areas should avoid sleeping on bare ground. Instead, use tents or ground covers.

Colorado residents can call the Department of Public Health and Environment's Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology Division at (303) 692-2700 to receive a brochure on hantavirus. Answers to frequently asked questions about hantavirus can also be found on the State Health Department's Web page at www.cdphe.state.co.us/dc/zoonosis/hanta/hantafaq.html.

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