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Hantavirus Prevention

by Sarah Bruno, ARM

Hantavirus is a rare but serious disease spread by infected wild rodents found throughout California. While only a small number of cases are reported in the state each year, the illness can cause severe respiratory disease and can be fatal. Because workplace exposure often occurs during routine activities such as cleaning sheds, outbuildings, garages, barns, or other enclosed spaces where rodents have been present, understanding the risk and how to prevent infection is important.

How Is Hantavirus Contracted?

People become infected when they are exposed to infected rodents. The most common route of transmission is breathing in air contaminated with particles from the urine, droppings, saliva, or nesting materials of infected rodents. A person can also be infected by touching the face (eyes, nose or mouth) after touching a surface contaminated with the virus, being bitten or scratched by an infected rodent, or eating contaminated food. The risk is highest when cleaning or entering enclosed areas that have not been accessed for long periods (no circulation or fresh air) and where rodents have been active. Activities such as sweeping, vacuuming, or disturbing rodent-contaminated materials can release virus particles into the air, increasing the chance of exposure. In California, the primary carrier is the deer mouse, and person-to-person transmission is not associated with the strain typically found in the western United States (Sin Nombre virus).

Common Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms usually develop between one and eight weeks after exposure. Early symptoms often resemble the flu and may include fever, fatigue, muscle aches, headaches, chills, nausea, vomiting, or abdominal discomfort. As the illness progresses, individuals may develop coughing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness. Because early symptoms can be mistaken for other illnesses, anyone experiencing flu-like symptoms after potential exposure to rodents should seek medical attention promptly and inform their healthcare provider about the potential exposure.

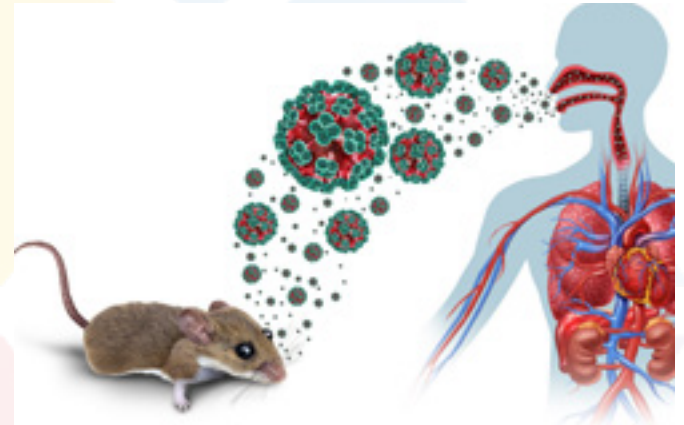
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Prevention Steps

The most effective way for employers to reduce the risk of hantavirus exposure is to minimize rodent activity in workplaces, storage facilities, maintenance areas, and other buildings under their control. Employers should implement rodent prevention and control measures, including sealing openings where mice can enter, maintaining good housekeeping practices, and storing food and other attractants in rodent-resistant containers.

Before entering a closed building that may contain rodents, the space should be ventilated for at least 30 minutes. Buildings that have been vacant or infrequently used should be inspected for signs of rodent activity before employees enter or begin work.

When rodent droppings, nests, or other contaminated materials are identified, employers should ensure that safe cleanup practices are followed. Areas should be well ventilated before and during cleaning. Contaminated materials should be thoroughly wetted with an EPA-registered disinfectant or fresh 10% bleach solution and left to soak for 5 minutes before removal. Sweeping or vacuuming rodent-contaminated materials should be avoided, as these activities can release infectious particles into the air.



Employers should evaluate whether personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves or respiratory protection, is needed for tasks that may disturb rodent droppings, nests, or contaminated materials.

Although hantavirus is uncommon in California, its potentially severe health effects make prevention important. Employers can help reduce the risk of hantavirus exposure through effective rodent control, employee awareness, and safe cleanup practices. For further assistance or questions about Hantavirus, please contact [PRISM Risk Control](#).