



**Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment**

*“To protect and improve
the health and environment
of the people of Colorado.”*

NEWS

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Hantavirus Deaths Reported in Three More Colorado Counties *Coloradans Urged to Take Precautions*

DENVER—The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has confirmed three hantavirus pulmonary syndrome deaths in the past five days, one each in rural Custer, Costilla and Park counties. Investigations are being conducted to determine the source of each hantavirus exposure. This brings the number of hantavirus pulmonary syndrome cases in Colorado in 2007 to six, with four deaths. Two cases reported in May occurred in Weld and Alamosa counties; the patient from Alamosa died. Two weeks ago another hantavirus case from Park County was confirmed in a patient who survived after a prolonged hospitalization.

Hantavirus is a serious respiratory disease carried by deer mice, which are rural mice. With the confirmation of four cases within the past two weeks, state health officials are warning Coloradans in the rural part of the state to be cautious and avoid exposure to hantavirus when working in and around cabins, buildings, sheds and barns where deer mouse populations have left droppings.

John Pape, a Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment epidemiologist who specializes in animal-related diseases, said, “The virus can infect humans when they inhale dirt and dust contaminated with deer mice urine and feces, which occurs when people have contact with infected mice or stir up dust while working in or cleaning out rodent-infested structures.”

Since the drought conditions eased in the past couple years, there have been an increasing number of cases reported corresponding to the rise in rodent populations. In 2005, there were a record 11 cases, one of which was fatal. Six cases, two fatal, were reported in 2006. Since the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment began tracking hantavirus pulmonary syndrome in 1993, the state has documented 61 cases with 23 fatalities (38 percent).

Pape urged people to be particularly careful where there are mouse droppings or other evidence that mice have been in and around buildings or wood piles. A large, rapid increase in the number of mice around a home often precedes a human case, he said. "Seeing a large jump in the deer mouse populations around a home should be considered a red flag," he said.

"Several signs are pointing to a potentially higher risk of hantavirus exposure this year," explained Pape. "May, June and July are the months when most of our human cases occur, so we want to remind people to be aware of the rodents around their homes and take precautions to protect their families."

If live mice are occupying a structure, rodent 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 sprayed with a mixture of bleach and water before any cleaning begins. "Just vacuuming an area without first wetting it down doesn't provide the necessary protection," Pape emphasized.

He suggested rodent-proofing the home by eliminating food sources for rodents and removing abandoned vehicles, wood, brush and junk piles where rodents hide.

"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," he said.

Additional precautions to provide protection against hantavirus include:

- Rodent-proof buildings by plugging holes or other mouse entryways.
- In rural areas, conduct year-round rodent control using traps or poisons, or hire a professional exterminator. Don't wait until the mouse population spikes.

- Make home or work areas unattractive to rodents by keeping indoor areas clean, especially kitchens. Store food in rodent-proof containers. This includes pet, livestock and bird food. Properly dispose of garbage in sealed containers.
- Store firewood at least 100 feet from the house. Keep vegetation around the house short and well trimmed.
- 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.

SYMPTOMS

Hantavirus 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.

Initially, there are no respiratory symptoms present. Symptoms such as a runny nose, sneezing, sinus congestion, and a cough that produces phlegm are not associated with hantavirus infection. However, within one to five days, the illness quickly progresses to respiratory distress, including shortness of breath and difficulty breathing, caused by the lungs filling with fluid.

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

Pape said, “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. If you become ill with these symptoms, it is important to tell your physician about exposures to deer mice or rodent-infested environments.”

DEER MOUSE DESCRIPTION

Deer mice are brown on top and white underneath, with a very distinct separation of these colors. They have large ears relative to their head size. House mice on the other hand are all gray and have small ears. The small, gray house mice commonly found in urban areas do not carry the disease.

For more information about hantavirus, call the Colorado HELP hotline at 1-877-462-2911.