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Spring Cleaning? Watch for Hantavirus

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Are your fingers itching to start spring cleaning? As the weather warms up, many of us grab a broom and a rag and get to work clearing out the dust and cobwebs that gather in our homes and garages over the winter. While all of that cleaning may feel great to accomplish and is necessary, there is a chance it could make you sick.

Hantavirus is a virus carried by rodents and can spread to people from rodent urine, saliva, or droppings. In Colorado, the primary carriers are the Deer Mouse and White-Footed Mouse. The virus can be breathed in by people when infected particles are stirred up into the air, such as when sweeping. Hantavirus is most commonly encountered in more rural settings, such as barns, sheds, and outbuildings where rodent populations are higher. However, the Centers for Disease Controls reports, if mice decide your home looks like a cozy place to set up their home, this can also present risk. Other risk factors include opening and cleaning previously unused buildings, such as cabins, working in crawl spaces or vacant buildings, and even while camping and hiking, if infested shelters are used.

Once a person breathes contaminated air, the virus grows in the lungs. Early symptoms may occur one to five weeks after exposure and include fever, headache, muscle aches, stomach problems, dizziness, and chills. It can be difficult to diagnose in this stage because its symptoms are similar to many other illnesses. However, as the disease progresses, patients may have coughing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness as fluid fills the lungs.

Hantavirus is often fatal. A person who suspects they may have become ill after coming in contact with rodents or cleaning an area that might have been infested should see their health care provider right away.

Hantavirus cannot be treated with antibiotics but, with intensive hospital care and antiviral medications, people can recover. The earlier a person seeks care, the better their chances of survival. People who do survive usually do not have long term problems from the infection and the virus goes away completely.

- Since it is so often fatal, prevention is very important. These are some steps you can take to minimize your risk:
 - Seal any holes inside and outside the home to keep rodents out. Two common materials are caulking and steel wool.



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- Keep food, including pet food, sealed so rodents aren't attracted to it, and keep cooking areas clean.
- Keep bird feeders, compost bins, woodpiles, and trash cans away from the side of the home if possible.
- If you see evidence of rodents in your home, set traps and try to determine how they are getting in.
- If you are cleaning areas where you suspect rodents may have recently lived or are likely to live, take precautions by opening windows or doors and allowing the area to "breathe" for at least 30 minutes. Do not stir up the dust or dirt in the area you think might be affected and wear a dust mask and latex or vinyl gloves while cleaning potentially infected areas. Soak affected areas with a bleach and water solution. Leave it for five minutes and then wipe with paper towels or a rag. If carpets or furniture are in the area, they should be cleaned with a commercial disinfectant made for these items.
- If infestations are big, call a professional who specializes in rodent cleanup.

While Hantavirus is rare, it is serious. Preventing rodent infestations and taking care when cleaning potentially infected areas is the best method to prevent human infection. More information on Hantavirus is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/hantavirus> or from Preventive Medicine at 719-526-2939.