



Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment

NEWS RELEASE

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Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

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Coloradans urged to protect against hantavirus

DENVER – As spring cleaning nears, state health officials are warning Coloradans to avoid exposure to hantavirus when opening up cabins, buildings, sheds and barns.

Hantavirus is a respiratory disease carried by deer mice. Deer mice are brown on top and white underneath. They have large ears relative to their head size. House mice are all gray and have small ears and don't carry the disease.

Hantavirus is transmitted by inhaling dust contaminated with the virus in a mouse-infested area. Already this year, hantavirus has claimed the life of an individual in Southwest Colorado and sickened another in Weld county. Colorado averages about four cases of hantavirus a year. In 2010, five cases and two deaths were reported.

Elisabeth Lawaczeck, state health veterinarian with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, said, "Now is the time when people begin cleaning out barns, garages, storage buildings, sheds, trailers or cabins that have been closed up all winter. They need to take precautions before beginning such work, particularly if there are mouse droppings and other signs of mice. Be particularly vigilant where there are mouse droppings and evidence that mice have been in and around the buildings or nearby wood or junk piles."

Rodent proofing and control also should be done before extensive cleaning efforts, she said. Structures should be ventilated thoroughly, and any accumulation of dust, dirt and mouse droppings should be wetted down with a mixture of bleach and water before any cleaning begins.

“Vacuuming an area without first wetting it down will not provide the necessary protection,” said Lawaczek.

She advised rodent-proofing the home by plugging holes and entry points where mice can get inside; eliminating food sources for rodents; and removing abandoned vehicles and wood, brush and junk piles where rodents hide.

Hantavirus, which causes death in nearly half of all cases, begins with a high fever, severe body aches, a headache and vomiting. The onset of these symptoms begins from one to six weeks after exposure.

Initially, there are no respiratory symptoms present. “If, however, you develop a fever, headache and muscle pain within six weeks of exposure to deer mice, seek medical care immediately,” advised Lawaczek. Because no effective treatment exists for the disease, prevention is the key to avoiding hantavirus.

Hantavirus prevention tips at-a-glance

- 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 wetting 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.

- Thoroughly soak 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.