



Hantavirus heads up

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There you are, all set for the big spring cleanup at the cabin up the lake. Broom in hand and garbage bags in the back pocket, you will soon be exposed to an illness that kills about one in three people it hits: Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome.

Okay, so we are being melodramatic, but there is a need for caution. While HPS is a very serious illness, it is relatively rare. First described in the southwestern United States in 1993, Hantavirus was first found in Canada in 1994 when three cases were reported in British Columbia. Since then about 50 more cases have been found, mostly in the western provinces. Most recently a case was identified in a woman in Whatcom County, across from Langley in Washington state — this was March 2006.

Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome is a rare but potentially fatal disease transmitted mainly by exposure to wild mice, their urine, droppings or nesting materials. In Canada, the virus is found only in wild mice, specifically the deer mouse.

One of the most common ways people are exposed is during spring cleaning as they start cleaning cabins and barns after the winter. The infection is mainly transmitted when mouse droppings and urine are disturbed, sending virus particles into the air where they can be breathed in.

The symptoms of infection usually arise one to six weeks after exposure and resemble severe flu. They include fever, chills, body aches, abdominal pain, cough and difficulty breathing. While the overall risk of acquiring a hantavirus infection is very low, precautions are always a good idea.

Guarding against HPS starts with getting rodents out of your home or property, and keeping them out. Then, with doing a safe cleanup. Minimize the presence of mice by reducing the availability of food sources or nesting materials. Use traps and seal points of entry into buildings such as barns, sheds, and summer cabins. Cutting grass, bush and dense shrubbery around homes and outbuildings is a good idea. Also, elevate sheds, woodpiles and outbuildings wherever possible.

When cleaning up, work to disturb mouse droppings as little as possible. In fact, do not sweep at all before wetting the area; do not use a vacuum cleaner to remove them. Before cleaning, ventilate enclosed areas for half an hour. When you finally go in, wear a filter

mask, rubber gloves and goggles. As for droppings, nests and dead mice, wet them down first with a bleach solution (1 part bleach in 10 parts water) and place them in double-sealed plastic bags. Burn, bury or discard them. Finish up by carefully washing your hands.

You may not think you have any mouse problems, or risk exposure, but do not feel too confident. Many people who have contracted HPS reported that they had not seen rodents or their droppings before getting sick. If you live in an area where the

deer mouse is known to live, take sensible precautions, even if you do not see rodents or their droppings.

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