

Everything You Need to Know About Hantavirus

Key Takeaways

- A shipboard cluster of suspected hantavirus cases with high case fatality has triggered port restrictions despite low population-level transmission risk.
- Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome results from inhalation or contact exposure to infected rodent urine, droppings, or saliva, without known human-to-human spread.
- Clinical course is biphasic, evolving from nonspecific influenza-like illness to acute cardiopulmonary failure with cough, dyspnea, hypotension, and dysrhythmias.
- Viral persistence outside the host is limited to hours–days, typically 2–3 days at room temperature, shortened by sunlight and prolonged by freezing temperatures.
- No approved antiviral therapy exists; outcomes improve with early recognition and aggressive ICU supportive measures, including mechanical ventilation and extracorporeal membrane oxygenation when indicated.

A hantavirus outbreak aboard a cruise ship is raising urgent concerns about the dangers of this rare but deadly rodent-borne virus.

The MV Hondius cruise ship sailing the Atlantic Ocean off Cape Verde reported an outbreak of hantavirus, affecting 6 individuals, of whom 3 have died.¹ Due to the outbreak, the cruise ship is being denied entry at ports—leaving almost 150 individuals on board and at risk of potentially contracting hantavirus.² Public health officials maintain that the risk is low but urge the public to take precautions considering the seriousness of the disease.

Here is everything you need to know.

1. What Is Hantavirus?

Hantavirus refers to a fatal family of viruses carried by rodents. Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPD) is the respiratory disease caused by hantavirus through exposure to infected rodent urine, droppings, or saliva. It is contracted through inhalation of airborne particles or contact with contaminated materials. There are no known cases of human-to-human transmission of the virus.³

There are multiple strains of hantavirus, which vary in severity. In North America, the deer mouse is the most common carrier of hantavirus—and the most fatal, with a death rate ranging from 30% to 50%.³

2. What Are the Symptoms of HPD?

HPD is characterized by flu-like symptoms that rapidly progress to more severe disease that may cause life-threatening lung and heart complications.³

Symptoms of hantavirus typically start about 2 to 3 weeks following infection and advance through 2 stages. The most common signs in the first stage include fever and chills, muscle aches, headache, and potentially gastrointestinal symptoms such as nausea, stomach pain, vomiting, or diarrhea.³

In the second stage, the disease can lead to damaged lung tissues, fluid build-up, and compromised lung and heart function. These result in cough, difficulty breathing, low blood pressure, and irregular heart rate.³

3. How Long Can Hantavirus Survive On Surfaces?

Hantavirus can survive in the environment for varying lengths of time depending on temperature, humidity, sun exposure, and even the infected rodent's diet. At normal room temperature, the virus remains infectious for about 2 to 3 days. Sunlight shortens its viability, while freezing temperatures extend it. Because the virus survives only hours to days outside a host, human infection generally requires an active, ongoing infestation of infected rodents nearby.⁴

4. How Is Hantavirus Treated?

Treatment options are limited, and the best protection against hantavirus pulmonary syndrome is to avoid contact with rodents to prevent exposure. There is currently no specific antiviral drug approved to treat hantavirus infection. Patients who are diagnosed early and receive intensive medical care in an ICU tend to have better outcomes.³

Supportive care—such as oxygen therapy and mechanical ventilation to assist breathing—is the primary form of treatment. In severe cases, patients may require extracorporeal membrane oxygenation.³

5. Should the Public Be Concerned About Hantavirus?

For most, the risk of contracting hantavirus remains low. The virus is not transmitted person-to-person, and infection requires direct exposure to infected rodents or their droppings, urine, or saliva. However, certain groups face a higher risk—particularly those who live in or spend time in rural or wooded areas, work in agriculture, or encounter rodent infestations in enclosed spaces such as cabins, barns, or storage facilities.

Public health officials do not consider hantavirus a widespread public health threat, but they emphasize that individual cases can be severe and even fatal. The key to prevention is awareness and precaution.

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