A Hantavirus Exposure Control Program for Employers and Workers



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A Hantavirus

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Contents

Introduction 1

Hantavirus 2
- What is a hantavirus? 2
- Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome 2
- How is it transmitted? 3
- Where is the virus most likely to be encountered? 3

Employer responsibilities 4

Worker responsibilities 5

Exposure control plan 6

Rodent control 9

Respiratory protection 10
- Respirator selection and maintenance 10
- Fit-testing 11
- Worker health and training 11
- Cleaning, maintenance, and storage of respirators 11

Sample work procedures 12
- General hygiene precautions 12
- Rodent inspections 13
- Clean-up of rodent-contaminated areas 13
- Rodent handling 16
- Decontamination procedure for personal protective equipment 17

Introduction

Hantavirus infection is caused by a virus that is found in some field rodents, especially deer mice in Canada and the United States. The virus is rarely transmitted to people; when it is, the virus can cause severe illness—even death.

People can contract the disease when they breathe the virus that is found in the urine, saliva, or droppings of infected rodents. Hantavirus infections usually occur in rural or semirural areas where workers are more likely to contact infected rodents or their droppings. Those infected with the virus have shown flu-like symptoms that turn to a dangerous, pneumonia-like condition after two or three days.

This booklet is intended for employers and workers who may come into contact with rodents, or rodent droppings, while on the job.

This booklet contains guidelines for employers on preventing hantavirus infections and putting in place an exposure control program (ECP) to minimize potential worker exposure to rodents, or rodent droppings, contaminated with hantavirus. It also contains sample work procedures that employers can adapt to their specific work situations. The guidelines and recommendations in this book reflect what is currently known about this disease.

Although the guidelines in this book apply primarily to workers in rural or semirural areas across B.C., urban areas cannot be excluded. At any work location where rodents or rodent droppings are present, employers must consider the control measures in this document.

What is a hantavirus?

Hantaviruses are a group of viruses that are carried by many different kinds of wild rodents (mainly wild rats and mice), all over the world. Other small mammals could also be infected, but they are much less likely to spread the virus to other animals or people.

To date, only deer mice have been systematically tested and found to carry the virus in British Columbia; however, other rodents should not be ruled out as potential carriers. Fleas, mosquitoes, and other biting insects have not been implicated in the spread of hantaviruses.

Hantaviruses do not survive for long outside of their hosts—usually less than a week indoors, and only a few hours when exposed to direct sunlight. The viruses can also be killed by most household disinfectants (e.g., 10 percent chlorine bleach).

Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome

The disease caused by hantavirus—hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS)—begins as a flu-like illness. In the early stages, a worker may experience fever, sore muscles, headaches, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and shortness of breath. Usually, people do not get a sore throat, runny nose, or a rash.

As the disease progresses, fluid builds up in the lungs, making it difficult to breathe. Severe respiratory failure, resulting in death, can occur within a few days of the early-stage symptoms. Symptoms may appear from 5 to 45 days (the average is between 14 and 30 days) after exposure to the virus.

Although HPS is a rare disease, cases have been reported in numerous parts of Canada and the United States. There is no evidence that HPS can be transmitted from person to person; however, there have been outbreaks of a similar hantavirus disease (Andes virus) in South America, where transmission between people was reported. As a consequence, health care workers should take precautions when treating HPS patients.

How is it transmitted?

Infected rodents shed the virus in saliva, urine, and droppings. The virus is usually spread to humans when particles of infected saliva, urine, or feces are inhaled. The virus may be inhaled during direct contact with the rodents or from breathing airborne dust particles generated when rodent excreta are disturbed. People may also become infected if contaminated materials come into contact with broken skin or the membranes lining the eyelids and the eyeball.

It has not been determined if it is possible to become infected by eating or drinking food or water contaminated by rodents. Infection by rodent bites has been documented but is rare. The virus does not appear to cause illness in its rodent hosts.

Studies conducted in the United States have shown that only about 10 percent of deer mice carry hantavirus.

Where is the virus most likely to be encountered?

Most rodents live in rural and semirural areas, generally not in urban centres. However, many rodents are highly adaptable and can be found in homes as well as commercial and industrial buildings. As such, the B.C. Ministry of Health has declared hantavirus to be potentially present in all of British Columbia.

To date, at least seven cases of HPS have been confirmed in B.C. Most of these were work-related, and all appeared to involve direct contact with mice or their droppings.

Cases of hantavirus have been associated with

- Sweeping out a barn and other farm or rural buildings (cottages, sheds, etc.)
- Trapping and studying mice
- Using compressed air and dry sweeping to clean up wood waste in a sawmill
- Handling grain contaminated with mouse droppings and urine
- Entering a barn infested with mice
- Planting or harvesting field crops
- Occupying previously vacant dwellings
- Disturbing rodent-infested areas while hiking or camping
- Living in dwellings with a sizable indoor rodent population

Employer responsibilities

Where it is reasonable to expect that workers could be exposed to rodents (or their saliva, urine, or droppings) as part of their normal job duties, employers must comply with the sections on biohazardous materials in Part 6 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation. Under these requirements, employers will typically have to develop and implement exposure control plans that eliminate or minimize the specific risks and hazards of hantavirus in their workplaces.

Employers should

- Inform and instruct workers on how to eliminate or reduce the risk of contact with rodent saliva, urine, or droppings
- Ensure that work practices eliminate or minimize the risk of unforeseen contact
- Provide workers with the equipment, tools, and personal protective equipment (PPE) needed to deal with an unexpected contact
- Monitor the workplace to ensure that safeguards are used and safe work practices are followed
- In case of a potential or suspected exposure, ensure that employees are aware of procedures for reporting incidents of exposure to the employer and a physician

If an exposure incident occurs at a workplace, the employer must investigate it and, based on the findings, develop ways to prevent similar incidents from occurring.

Worker responsibilities

Workers also have responsibilities to help reduce the risk of contact with rodent saliva, urine, and droppings. Workers must

- Attend education and training sessions provided by the employer
- Use controls and follow safe work practices established by the employer
- Use the available tools and PPE that have been provided for use in chance encounters with rodent saliva, urine, and droppings
- Know how to report exposure incidents
- Know that they should not clean up dust or other materials that might be contaminated with rodent urine or droppings, unless they have the proper cleaning materials and PPE, and have been trained to do so safely

Exposure control plan

An employer must develop and implement an exposure control plan (ECP) if a worker has or may have occupational exposure to biohazardous materials such as hantaviruses. Exposure control plans may range from the simple and straightforward (e.g., for office workers in a building with a rodent problem) to more complex ECPs used by hazardous material removal companies.

In the Regulation

The requirements for exposure control plans are found in the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, sections 5.54 and 6.34.

An effective exposure control plan for hantavirus could include the following five elements:

1. **Statement of purpose and responsibilities**: The purpose of an exposure control plan is to prevent harmful exposure of workers to hantaviruses. Assignment of responsibilities for applying the ECP in a small workplace is likely to be straightforward, and would typically involve one person. In a larger workplace, a number of individuals may divide the responsibilities between them.

2. **Risk identification and assessment**: A key step in developing the exposure control plan is an understanding of the nature of the virus and how it can be transmitted. In the case of hantaviruses, the risk identification and exposure assessment would be based on factors such as

   a) *Routes of transmission by which the virus can infect a worker:* For hantaviruses, exposure would be through contact with contaminated rodent saliva, urine, and droppings. Person-to-person transmission hasn't been reported in B.C.

      The employer must have a qualified person inspect building areas and structures that are accessible to workers, to look for evidence of a rodent presence—rodents, droppings, nests, or tracks on dusty surfaces (especially along walls and behind fixtures and equipment).

   b) *Identification of the workers at risk of exposure:* For example, workers in rural workplaces, where there are lots of deer mice, would be at greater risk of exposure.

   c) *Work methods or procedures that may result in exposure:* The risk would increase if work duties included cleaning up dust or other materials contaminated with rodent droppings.

3. **Risk control**: The required controls may range from simple personal protective equipment to more extensive measures that include engineering controls—filtration and negative pressure containment for more extensive clean-ups. Personal protective equipment may include respirators, gloves, disposable coveralls, and goggles. The proper donning, fit checking, doffing, and disposal of the equipment must also be considered.

   The employer must put in place an integrated approach to rodent control that incorporates sanitation, rodent proofing (exclusion), and rodent population reduction techniques. Rodent population reduction activities (especially trapping) should only be undertaken by qualified personnel. For more information on controlling rodents, see the *Rodent Control* section.

4. **Education and training**: The employer must ensure that workers are informed about the contents of the ECP and provided with adequate education and training to work safely with, and in proximity to, materials potentially contaminated with hantavirus.

   If there is evidence of rodents in the workplace, the employer must inform all affected workers of the following:
   - The risk of exposure to hantavirus
   - Safe work procedures to be followed
   - The requirement to report evidence of rodent activity to the employer
   - The requirement to report any signs of illness to the employer

   The employer must also provide instruction to workers who may come into contact with rodents or their droppings. Instructions must include the following topics:
   - The nature of the hazard
   - Safe work procedures (including personal protective clothing)
   - Use of respirators
   - Symptoms of the illness
   - The need to seek medical attention if symptoms appear

A qualified person is an occupational health and safety professional with experience in the practice of occupational hygiene as it relates to hantavirus exposure. Persons who perform risk assessments and develop work procedures must be certified and educated as follows:

- Certified Industrial Hygienist (CIH) or Registered Occupational Hygienist (ROH) *with education specific to hantavirus exposure and work procedures*
- Certified Safety Professional (CSP), Canadian Registered Safety Professional (CRSP), or a Professional Engineer *with education specific to hantavirus exposure and work procedures*
- Other combinations of education, training, and experience *specific to hantavirus exposure and work procedures*

5. **Written procedures, hygiene/decontamination facilities, health monitoring, and documentation:**

   a) Employers must develop site-specific, written work procedures for controlling the risk of exposure to hantaviruses. These procedures must be made readily available to workers. For more information on written work procedures, see the *Sample Work Procedures* section on page 12.

   b) Hygiene facilities to permit proper hand washing, whenever required, are a basic expectation under all ECPs. Decontamination procedures will be needed when cleaning reusable personal protective equipment such as respirators and goggles.

   c) Unprotected workers who are exposed to material potentially contaminated with hantaviruses should be monitored for possible symptoms, and referred to a physician, if necessary.

   d) A record must be kept of all workers who are directly exposed to material potentially contaminated with hantaviruses while on the job, and of worker education and training sessions on biohazardous materials.

The exposure control plan must be reviewed at least annually and updated as necessary by the employer, in consultation with the workplace health and safety committee or the worker health and safety representative.

Rodent control

The primary prevention strategy for minimizing worker exposure to hantaviruses is rodent control in and around the worksite. An effective rodent control program requires an integrated approach and includes the following:

1. **Ongoing inspections for rodents**: Conducted by qualified persons, inspections will determine if active rodent control is required.

2. **Sanitation**: This refers to reducing the number of locations, both inside the worksite and in the immediate vicinity, where rodents may feed or find shelter.

   Examples of locations inside the workplace include:
   - Food storage containers and areas around the containers
   - Garbage storage areas
   - Nooks and crannies

   Examples of locations outside of the workplace include
   - Rubbish piles (e.g., wood piles)
   - Infrequently used equipment
   - Garbage
   - Weeds and long grass

3. **Rodent proofing (exclusion)**: These measures refer to the closing of openings where rodents gain entry and establish runways (commonly travelled paths). Mice can gain entry through a hole as small as six millimetres (about ¼ inch) in diameter. Proofing materials include steel wool, fine mesh screens, mortar, sheet metal, etc.

4. **Rodent population reduction**: This can be achieved by trapping or by poisoning with rodenticides. Kill traps minimize the risk of handling. Rodenticides are hazardous to humans and non-target species, and consequently should be handled and applied only by persons certified in their safe use.

Where exposure to hantaviruses is expected, workers must wear respiratory protection to perform some job tasks. When workers are required to wear respirators, the employer must implement and maintain a respiratory protection program. The following headings identify the basic parts of a respiratory protection program.

Respirator selection and maintenance

To reduce the risk of exposure to hantaviruses, select the appropriate respirator according to this table.

Respirator type	Use
Disposable N95 respirator	General clean-up, handling, and maintenance activities for which there is known or probable rodent contamination, but no heavy accumulations of droppings
Half-face air-purifying respirators (APR), rubber or silicone, reusable, equipped with P100 filters	Cleaning up rodent-contaminated areas where there is an accumulation of droppings and excess dust is not being generated, or where the handling of rodents, alive or dead, is uncommon
Powered air-purifying respirators (PAPR) equipped with P100 filters or air-supplied respirators	Cleaning up heavy accumulations of rodent droppings where excess dust may be generated

Fit-testing

When a worker is first issued a respirator, he or she must be fit-tested with that respirator, using an accepted protocol (such as that in CSA Standard Z94.4-02). Fit-testing ensures that the respirator fits properly and provides an effective seal with the face for the wearer.

Employers must maintain a record of the fit-test that includes the make, model, and size. Fit-tests must be repeated annually.

Each time a worker puts on a respirator, the worker must check the seal by performing a "field check" (such as that in the CSA Standard Z94.4-02). A field check is a simple test performed by the wearer to ensure that the respirator is providing an effective seal with the face.

In the Regulation

The requirements for respiratory protection programs are found in Part 8 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation and in the WorkSafeBC publication *Breathe Safer: How to use respirators safely and start a respirator program*.

Worker health and training

Workers must be medically able to wear and use a respirator. Workers are to be trained in the use, care, and limitations of the respirator, as follows:

- All workers must be trained in the proper donning and doffing of their respirators.
- Workers must check the operation of their respirators and the seal prior to each use (facial hair, eyeglasses, or other personal protective equipment must not interfere with the seal).
- Workers must be trained to properly clean, maintain, and store their respirators.

Cleaning, maintenance, and storage of respirators

Respirators are to be maintained and stored as follows:

- Discard single-use respirators (N95 disposable respirators) after use; for other types of respirators, clean and disinfect them after each use.
- Inspect respirators before and after each use for signs of wear or malfunction.
- Replace filters frequently (on respirators that have P100 filters)—certainly if breathing begins to become difficult.
- Store respirators in a clean, cool place, free from contamination, and in a manner that will not distort the respirator face piece.

Sample work procedures

This section contains sample work procedures that will allow employers to minimize worker exposure to hantaviruses. Use these procedures as a guide in developing written work procedures tailored to your specific work circumstances.

In particular, be aware of the need to develop safe work procedures for those who do short-term work in areas where contact with rodents or their droppings is likely or possible. Workers who may have to enter buildings, crawl spaces, or other rodent-infested sites include: telephone installers, maintenance workers, plumbers, electricians, some construction trade workers, and agricultural workers.

In all cases for which specific safe work procedures are developed, have a qualified person assess the work situation and evaluate the risk.

General hygiene precautions

The following standard precautions must be taken when workers clean up rodent contamination:

1. Provide two cleaning solutions:
   - One for disinfecting—a diluted household bleach solution (100 mL household bleach/litre water) to be used on rodent carcasses, rodent nesting materials, droppings, and surfaces and materials contaminated with droppings or urine; or to decontaminate rubber gloves and boots
   - One for cleaning—a solution of domestic laundry detergent mixed according to manufacturer's instructions to be used to decontaminate clothing and personal protective equipment
2. Cover any broken skin that may be exposed to infection prior to beginning clean-up of rodent contamination.
3. After protective clothing or equipment is removed, wash any exposed skin (facilities or material for washing must be provided).

Rodent inspections

Employers are responsible for ensuring that all parts of a facility that are accessible to workers are periodically assessed by a qualified person to detect rodent presence. Rodent signs include

- Droppings
- Live/dead rodents
- Rodent odours
- Urine stains (detected with an ultraviolet light)
- Tracks
- Gnawing damage
- Burrows
- Runways (commonly travelled paths)
- Rodent sounds

Where a rodent presence is likely—such as in rural and semirural workplace situations, or in isolated work areas not normally part of the regular work area—workers inspecting for rodents or rodent activity must wear the same protective equipment and clothing that would be required for workers conducting clean-up. Where an inspection confirms the presence of rodents or rodent contamination, the decontamination procedure should be followed (see page 17).

Clean-up of rodent-contaminated areas

The following procedures are to be applied when cleaning up ***small quantities of rodent droppings***:

1. Clear all unnecessary workers from the area.
2. Ventilate the area by opening windows and doors, if possible.
3. Wear disposable N95 respirator.
4. Wear disposable gloves (e.g., latex-free, neoprene, or nitrile).
5. Spray the debris with disinfectant (e.g., 10 percent chlorine bleach) solution to soak the material. Avoid using a stream of liquid—this may create aerosols.

6. Scoop up the material. Dispose of all contaminated material in double plastic bags. Seal the bags. Label them to identify the contents, and handle the bags in a manner that will avoid punctures. Contaminated material may be disposed of with regular construction waste or garbage as long as the amount of material can be safely treated by being soaked in a disinfectant solution and the material is in double plastic bags.

7. Wipe or mop surfaces with a solution of disinfectant and detergent.

8. Decontaminate and remove personal protective equipment and clothing in accordance with the decontamination procedure (see page 17).

The following procedures are to be applied when there is ***evidence of significant rodent activity***, for example, when cleaning up a large amount of rodent droppings, or when handling materials significantly contaminated with rodent droppings:

1. Clear all unnecessary workers from the area.

2. Ventilate the area by opening windows and doors, if possible.

3. Wear a half-mask air-purifying respirator equipped with P100 filters or a powered air-purifying respirator (PAPR) with P100 filters. The respirator must be used and maintained in accordance with a respirator program.

4. Wear disposable gloves (e.g., latex-free, neoprene, or nitrile).

5. Wear disposable coveralls made of a material that will resist the penetration of dust particles and that ensures a snug fit at the wrists and ankles.

6. Wear rubber boots or disposable shoe coverings when footwear contamination is likely.

7. Wear eye or face protection (e.g., goggles without vent holes) to prevent aerosols from coming into contact with the mucous membranes of the eyes.

8. Clean up rodent droppings and other directly contaminated waste by first spraying the debris (gently) with a disinfectant solution (e.g., 10 percent chlorine bleach) to soak the material—avoid using a stream of solution because this will generate aerosols—then collect the material in one of the following ways:
   - Vacuum with a vacuum cleaner equipped with a High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter. Do not use other types of vacuums—including wet/dry types—because they may disperse the virus throughout the work area.
   - If the material is soaked through to the point of run-off, use a scoop or shovel to carefully move the material into a plastic disposal bag.
9. Wipe or mop surfaces with a solution of disinfectant and detergent.
10. Dispose of all contaminated material in double plastic bags. Seal the bags. Label them to identify the contents and handle the bags in a manner that will avoid punctures. Contaminated material may be disposed of with regular construction waste or garbage as long as the amount of material can be safely treated by being soaked in a disinfectant solution and the material is in double plastic bags.
11. Decontaminate and remove personal protective equipment and clothing in accordance with the decontamination procedure (see page 17).

Never use an air hose to blow down rodent droppings or rodent-contaminated materials—doing so may create potentially hazardous dusts and mists.

The clean-up procedure used must incorporate methods that limit the generation of aerosols (dirt or dust) from potentially contaminated items such as surfaces or personal protective equipment used in the clean-up.

Rodent handling

This procedure is for the protection of workers who must handle rodents (e.g., mammalogists, wildlife biologists, pest control workers). Rodents may be alive or dead.

1. Wear a half-face air-purifying respirator equipped with P100 filters. The respirator must be used and maintained in accordance with a respiratory protection program.

2. Wear disposable gloves (e.g., latex-free, neoprene, or nitrile). If rodents are alive, wearing leather or canvas (or other similar material) gloves over the disposable gloves will prevent bites from penetrating to the skin.

3. Wear disposable coveralls made of a material that will resist the penetration of dust particles and that ensures a snug fit at the wrists and ankles.

4. Wear eye or face protection (e.g., goggles without vent holes) to prevent aerosols from coming into contact with the mucous membranes of the eye.

5. Disinfect rodent traps with a disinfectant solution (e.g., 10 percent chlorine bleach).

6. Soak dead rodents in a disinfectant solution before sealing them in a plastic bag for disposal.

7. Clean up rodent droppings and other directly contaminated waste by first spraying the debris (gently) with a disinfectant solution to soak the material—avoid using a stream of solution because this will generate aerosols—then collect the material in one of the following ways:
   - Vacuum with a vacuum cleaner equipped with a High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter. Do not use other types of vacuums—including wet/dry types—because they may disperse the virus throughout the work area.
   - If the material is soaked through to the point of run-off, use a scoop or shovel to carefully move the material into a plastic disposal bag.

8. Dispose of all contaminated material—including dead rodents—in double plastic bags. Seal the bags, label them to identify the contents, and handle them in a manner that will avoid punctures. Bags of animal waste should be incinerated.

9. Decontaminate and remove personal protective equipment and clothing in accordance with the decontamination procedure.

Don't trap rodents for the purposes of hantavirus testing. This is a hazardous activity and should only be undertaken by specially trained, qualified personnel.

Decontamination procedure for personal protective equipment

After any activity involving the handling of contaminated or potentially contaminated material, and before leaving the immediate work area, apply these procedures. Do not remove respiratory protective equipment until other decontamination steps are complete.

1. Remove coveralls at the perimeter of the work area, and place them in a disposal bag. Collapse the bag, and temporarily seal it.

2. Move away from the clean-up or contaminated work area to a location where there are no other workers—preferably outdoors—leaving eye and respiratory protection in place.

3. Wet-wipe exposed reusable respirator surfaces, eyewear, and rubber footwear with a disinfectant solution (e.g., 10 percent chlorine bleach).

4. Rinse the outside of gloves in the disinfectant solution. Remove the gloves and place them in a plastic bag for disposal (or if the gloves are reusable, disinfect them before storing them).

5. Place disposable respirators in a plastic bag. Permanently seal the bag. Label the bag. For reusable respirators, tape shut the inlet opening of the respirator cartridges to prevent the release of dusts (cartridges may be reused until breathing becomes difficult) or discard the cartridges. Clean and disinfect the respirator body. Store the respirators in a cool, clean location free from contamination.

6. Remove eyewear. Clean and disinfect it before storing it, or discard it.

7. Wash exposed skin surfaces thoroughly with soap and water.

Notes

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