

## What You Should Know About Hantavirus

Hantavirus, a rare but potentially serious disease spread primarily by rodents, has recently returned to headlines following a deadly [outbreak](#) linked to a cruise ship in early May 2026. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported multiple confirmed and suspected cases among passengers, including three deaths, prompting international monitoring efforts and renewed awareness of the virus.

While the outbreak has drawn global attention, the WHO says the risk to the global population from this outbreak is low. However, understanding hantavirus, including how it spreads, its symptoms and prevention, can help reduce the risk of infection.

### About Hantavirus

[Hantaviruses](#) are a family of viruses that can cause severe illness in humans and are primarily carried by rodents such as mice and rats. People typically become infected through contact with infected rodents or by inhaling virus particles from their urine, droppings or saliva.

The virus can cause two main types of disease:

1. **Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS)**—A serious respiratory illness most common in North America and South America.
2. **Hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome (HFRS)**—A disease that affects the kidneys, more common in Europe and Asia.

Death rates vary by virus. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HPS is fatal in 38% of people infected, while the death rate for HFRS varies from 1% to 15% of patients.

Hantavirus gained national attention in the United States after a 1993 outbreak in the Four Corners region (where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah meet). Since then, it has been considered a rare but serious illness.

Since the CDC's national tracking began in 1993, fewer than 900 cases have been reported in the country, with most occurring in western states where rodent exposure is more common.

### About the Andes Strain

Investigators believe the recent outbreak may involve the [Andes strain](#) of hantavirus, a rare variant primarily found in South America. Unlike most strains, the Andes virus has shown limited ability to spread from person to person in close-contact settings, which raised additional concern in the confined environment of a cruise ship.

### Signs and Symptoms

According to the CDC, symptoms of hantavirus infection usually appear one to eight weeks after exposure and often begin like the flu. Early symptoms may include:

- Fatigue
- Fever
- Muscle aches, especially in the large muscle groups (e.g., thighs, hips, back and shoulders)
- Headache
- Chills
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pain

More severe symptoms can develop around four to 10 days after symptom onset, such as:

- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Fluid buildup in the lungs

HPS can become life-threatening, with more than one-third of cases resulting in death if not treated promptly.

## Transmission

Hantavirus is primarily spread through contact with infected rodents or their environments. Common ways transmission can occur include:

- Breathing in contaminated air when rodent droppings or urine are disturbed
- Touching contaminated surfaces and then touching the face
- Rodent bites or scratches (which are less common)

Unlike many respiratory viruses, hantavirus does not typically spread from person to person. The exception is the rare Andes virus strain, which has shown limited human-to-human transmission under close contact conditions.

## Prevention

Reducing exposure to rodents is key to preventing hantavirus infection. Recommended measures include:

- Avoid contact with rodents and their droppings.
- Seal entry points in homes and buildings to keep rodents out.
- Store food in rodent-proof containers.
- Use proper cleaning methods (such as disinfectants and ventilation) when dealing with rodent-infested areas.
- Avoid sweeping or vacuuming rodent waste, which can release virus particles into the air.

In general, practicing good hygiene and taking precautions in enclosed or dusty environments can significantly lower the risk of hantavirus.

## Treatment

Currently, there is no specific cure or widely available vaccine for hantavirus infection. Treatment focuses on:

- Supportive medical care
- Monitoring breathing and oxygen levels
- Managing complications early

Prompt medical attention can improve outcomes, especially for severe cases.

## Conclusion

Although recent headlines have brought hantavirus back into focus, it remains a rare disease with a low risk for most people. While hantavirus remains uncommon, isolated clusters and high-profile cases can still occur,

particularly in environments where people may be exposed to infected rodents or contaminated spaces.

Contact your health care provider if you have questions or concerns about hantavirus.