



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS DEMOLITION HANTAVIRUS

As an employee of a demolition contractor, my job involves working in abandoned buildings which may have been closed-up for years. I have heard about people dying due to Hantavirus. What is this illness and is it relevant to my job?

Answer: Hantavirous (*HV*) is a rare but deadly disease caused primarily by inhaling the virus found in the urine, droppings and saliva of infected rodents. *HV* is most often associated with work in rural areas opening and cleaning barns, outbuildings, sheds, etc. which have been closed/sealed up for the winter. Construction, utility, pest control, and yes demolition workers who work in crawl spaces, under houses, and in vacant buildings are also at risk.

One apparent limiting factor of *HV* illness is that only a few rodent species can become infected. This includes the deer mouse in the Western and Central US; the white footed mouse in the Northeast and cotton rat in the Southeast region of the US. According to the Center for Disease Control, a total of 624 cases of *HV* illness has been reported nationally since its discovery in 1993. *HV* cases have been documented in 34 states.

HV illness risk during renovations and demolition of previously closed-up structures with active rodent infestation should not be underestimated. *HV* (like asbestos, lead, mold) may be aerosolized during demolition of walls and ceilings and cleanup of demolition debris. Risk of exposure and illness is exacerbated by inadequate dust control measures and workers not wearing respiratory protection or other personal protective equipment during demolition activities.

Symptoms of *HV* illness are flu-like including fever, muscle aches, headache, nausea, diarrhea and cough which can progress to respiratory distress. Symptoms develop within 1-6 weeks after rodent exposure. *HV* has a fatality rate of 36%. There is no specific treatment for *HV* illness.

Steps to prevent *HV* illness during demolition include:

1. Buildings on the demolition site must be **inspected** by a licensed environmental consultant (**such as AET**) for existing hazards. EPA NESHAP inspections for asbestos is mandatory by law.
2. Demolition sites must be **baited and trapped** by a licensed pest control contractor prior to commencement of demolition work. .
3. Covered windows on closed-up buildings should be opened to allow **fresh air** into the previously sealed buildings and kept open as long as possible before entry and throughout the course of the demolition operation.
4. Demolition workers should wear a minimum of **N-95 respirators** during demolition operations including debris cleanup.
5. Disposable **protective clothing or coveralls** should also be worn to minimize contamination to workers street clothing. Laundering of work clothing should be done separately.
6. **Good personal hygiene practices** must be followed by the demolition workers as *HV* illness can also occur through ingestion from contaminated hands and clothing (including touching of the eyes, nose and mouth).
7. **Dust controls** (primarily wetting) must be implemented to minimize airborne dust levels. Do not dry sweep floors.
8. Clean-up all rodent nests and droppings using a **disinfectant**.
9. Follow **good housekeeping practices** at demolition sites. Do not let trash accumulate. Food stuff and containers should be kept in a separate trash can with a lid.
10. **Clean-up** all visible rodent urine, droppings, nests or dead mice using a disinfectant. Let it soak for 5 minutes. Wear rubber or plastic gloves. Bag contaminated materials separately.

When you need professional help or advice, email Alan Sutherland, CIH, CHMM at a.sutherland@aetinc.biz or call 610-891-0114. We provide nationwide services; phone consultations are free. Check out the full range of environmental contracting/consulting services we provide at our website www.aetinc.biz.

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