HEALTH NEWS FROM DR. YU
Thurston County Public Health & Social Services Department

Rodent Control and Hantavirus

Prepared August 2008

Hantaviruses are a group of viruses that are carried by some rodents. One of these viruses, Hantavirus pulmonary syndrome (HPS) is a rare but extremely serious condition caused by the virus. Humans can become infected when they are exposed while cleaning up mouse droppings or a mouse nest.

The primary carrier in Washington is the deer mouse, which is about six inches long (including the tail) and has a white belly, large ears and a furry tail that is also white on the underside. It is safest to take precautions whenever encountering wild rodents, their droppings or nests. People do not get hantavirus from other people, or from pets, including rodents purchased from a store, snakes, birds of prey, or other animals that might eat rodents.

The first strategy to avoid hantavirus is to keep rodents out of your home, well-house, sheds, and workplace. Seal openings larger than one quarter of an inch using rodent-resistant materials such as ı inch hardware cloth, concrete, sheet metal, brick, or mortar. Check for cracks or openings around the foundation, attic, vents, and places where pipes or cables enter the building.

Discourage mice and other rodents by removing food and nesting sources. Keep food, including pet food and bird seed, in rodent proof containers. Cover or remove fiberglass or other loose insulation from areas accessible to rodents. Avoid stacking firewood or other materials against the outside of living spaces and well-houses. Trap mice or rats with snap-traps.

Take the following steps to clean up rodent-infested areas.

- Open doors and windows to air out rodent-infested cabins, barns, sheds, garages, trailers, and other structures for 30 minutes or more before disturbing or cleaning inside. Sunlight helps kill hantavirus.

- Wear rubber, latex, vinyl, or nitrile gloves and a dust mask.

- Do not sweep, brush, or vacuum droppings or nests; that may stir up dust and increase your chances of inhaling hantavirus ï if it is present.

- Thoroughly soak or spray rodent areas (nests, droppings, dead mice) with a bleach/water mixture made by mixing one and one-half cups bleach in one gallon of water, or another disinfectant that kills viruses. Let it soak the area for ten minutes.

- Remove all of the nest material, droppings, and any dead mice with damp disposable materials such as paper towels or rags. Seal all materials, droppings, nests, and dead rodents in double plastic bags and dispose of them in the garbage.

- Mop or sponge the area with bleach solution or other disinfectant. Wash bedding and clothing in hot water. Steam-clean carpets, rugs, or upholstered furniture.

- Before taking off gloves, wash or disinfect them. Wash hands with soap and warm water after removing gloves.

If you have been exposed to rodents or rodent-infested buildings within the last six weeks, and have symptoms of fever, muscle aches, and severe shortness of breath, see your health care provider immediately. Inform your health care provider of possible rodent exposure.

For more information visit the following websites:

- Washington State Department of Health
  www.doh.wa.gov/ehsphl/factsheet/hanta.htm

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hanta/hps/

- Or call Thurston County Public Health and Social Services at 360-867-2667.

Dr. Diana Yu is the Health Officer for the
Thurston County Public Health and Social Services Department