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NEWS RELEASE

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Health Department Issues Hantavirus Warning As Holiday Weekend Approaches

The Arizona Department of Health Services today urged the public to take precautions when living or working in rodent infested areas, following the confirmation of seven cases of Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome this year.

The seven cases are not related and are from both northern and central Arizona. Four of the cases were fatal.

Hantavirus is an often deadly disease that usually begins with flu-like symptoms, and may rapidly progress to respiratory failure when the lungs fill with fluid. Patients usually develop breathing difficulty approximately two to six days after onset of symptoms.

“As Memorial Day Weekend approaches and many people will be opening up cabins in rural Arizona for the first time, it is important to remember that the best defense against infection with Hantavirus is to avoid disturbing areas of rodent infestation including nests and droppings,” State Epidemiologist David Engelthaler said. “If you do have to clean up droppings or nests, be sure to thoroughly soak the area first with a liquid disinfectant. Be especially cautious when entering a structure, such as a summer cabin, that has been closed. People who have been exposed to rodent droppings and who become ill with hantavirus-like symptoms should seek medical care.”

“We know hantavirus cases are tied closely to rodents and the environment. Environmental conditions appear to be right for Arizona to see a continued increase in cases of Hantavirus this year,” Engelthaler added. “These cases represent the most Hantavirus activity in Arizona since the outbreak of 1993-1994, when hantavirus pulmonary syndrome was first discovered in the Four Corners Region.” Arizona had 10 cases in each of those years.

To date, 51 cases of HPS have been reported in Arizona since 1992 (including these new cases). Sixteen of these cases were fatal. Five cases were reported in Arizona in all of 2005.

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Hantavirus/Add 1

Hantavirus can occur wherever deer mice live, that includes most rural areas throughout the state, including the desert fringe of the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas. The Health Department issued the following guidelines to reduce risk of contracting Hantavirus:

Proper clean-up methods:

- When rodent droppings or nests are found in and around the home, spray them liberally with a household disinfectant and allow them to soak for at least 15 minutes. Use disinfectants that kill viruses, such as Lysol®, or a solution of one-part household bleach mixed with nine parts water.
- After disinfecting, wear rubber gloves and clean up the droppings with disposable materials such as paper towels, rags or mops.
- Seal all materials, droppings or nests in double plastic bags and dispose of them in the trash.
- Do not clean the droppings or nests by sweeping, brushing or vacuuming, since these methods stir up dust and increase a person's chances of inhaling the virus.

Rodent-proof your home:

- Prevent rodents from entering the home by plugging or sealing all holes and gaps to the outside greater than 1/4-inch in diameter. Use steel wool, thick wire screen, metal flashing or cement to seal holes.
- Eliminate or reduce rodent shelter around the home by removing outdoor junk and clutter, and by moving woodpiles, lumber, hay bales etc., as far away from the house as possible.
- Keep the lawn trimmed and free of excess weeds and brush.
- Do not make food easily available to rodents. Do not leave pet food in dishes. Dispose of garbage in trash cans with tight-fitting lids.
- Wash dirty dishes promptly, and clean up spilled food immediately. Store bulk grains and animal feed in rodent-proof containers.

Rodent control:

- Control rodents inside the home by placing spring-loaded "snap" traps in areas where rodents and their droppings have been observed. Bait the traps with peanut butter and/or oats and check them regularly. When rodents are caught, spray the dead rodents with a disinfectant, such as Lysol or bleach and water, then wait at least 15 minutes. Put on rubber gloves and then seal the dead rodents in plastic bags before disposing of them in a trash can. The snap traps can be disinfected and re-used.
- In areas above 4,500 feet in elevation, any dead rodents and rodent nests should be sprayed with a pesticide to kill fleas before disinfecting or disposing the carcasses. This is to prevent flea bites and possible exposure to another disease, the plague.

For more information about Hantavirus, contact the Arizona Department of Health Services Vector Borne Disease Program at (602)364-4562.