

HANTAVIRUS

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Hantavirus is not new to the United States, but hantavirus infections here are relatively uncommon, with 'only' 890 cases, causing thirty-five percent mortality, in the last three decades. It has also appeared in India, China, Argentina (with the most cases), and parts of Europe and Africa. The recently infected cruise ship passengers were likely exposed to rodents or people carrying the virus prior to boarding.

Hantavirus infections are usually linked to exposure to rodent urine and/or feces. Person-to-person transmission is less likely, but can occur with the Andes strain, requiring prolonged, close contact in an enclosed living space.

Mortality depends on the viral strain. The strain most prevalent in the Americas (called Andes) has a 30 to 50 percent death rate from severe lung damage. Other strains may cause fever, profuse bleeding and kidney failure, with as little as one to fifteen percent mortality.

Treatment consists only of supportive care, so stay away from rodents, their waste and sick people. There is no proven vaccine preventive or cure. Don't expect a vaccine soon. The COVID vaccine emerged quickly because scientists unearthed mRNA genetic research, done by the young Hungarian-American scientist, Katalin Karikó (who received the 2025 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for her work), and the plethora of cases facilitated confirmation of efficacy more quickly than with other vaccines. Scientists are attempting to make an mRNA-based Hantavirus vaccine, but the low disease prevalence will make vaccine testing difficult.