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Protect yourself and your family against potential diseases

By Chris J. Minnick

New Mexico is a state with open ranges and vastly different terrain from deserts of the southeast to the high mountain ranges of the north. But the wide open spaces and close proximity to wildlife can put us at risk for diseases such as Hantavirus and plague. To stay safe from diseases, the New Mexico Department of Health advises residents to follow prevention guidelines carefully.

Eugene Martinez, who lives on a small ranch near Rio Rancho, said living in New Mexico is great because of the outdoor lifestyle you can lead all year long, but is also aware that the benefits are not without some risk.

“I know the diseases are out there, but I’ve never been afraid of them because with a little effort you can make sure you’re safe,” Martinez said. “It’s just takes a little more time to follow some of those guidelines, but in the long run it’s worth it.”

Plague is a bacterial disease of rodents and is generally transmitted to humans through the bites of infected fleas, but can also be transmitted by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, wildlife and pets.

Most people become ill two to seven days after being infected with the plague bacteria. Symptoms of bubonic plague in humans include fever, painful swollen lymph nodes in the groin, armpit or neck areas, chills, and sometimes headache, vomiting, and diarrhea.

To prevent cases of plague, the Department of Health recommends: avoid sick or dead rodents, teach children not to play near rodent nests or burrows, treat pets regularly with an effective flea control product, clean up areas near the house where rodents could live, keep pets from roaming and hunting, and take sick pets to a veterinarian promptly.

Hantavirus is a deadly disease transmitted by infected rodents through urine, droppings or saliva. People can contract the disease when they breathe in the aerosolized virus. The deer mouse is the main carrier for Hantavirus in New Mexico.

Early symptoms of Hantavirus are fever and muscle aches, possibly with chills, headache, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal pain and cough. These symptoms develop within one to six weeks after rodent exposure. Although there is no specific treatment for Hantavirus, chances for recovery are better if medical attention is sought early.

To protect yourself from Hantavirus: air out closed up buildings before entering; seal up homes and cabins so mice can't enter; trap mice until they are all gone; clean up nests and droppings using a disinfectant; put hay, wood and compost piles as far as possible from your home; get rid of trash and junk piles; and do not leave your pet's food and water where mice can get to them.

Since Hantavirus was discovered in the Four Corners area in 1993, there have been 71 cases and 29 deaths in New Mexico. Nationally, 438 cases have been reported in 32 states, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. About 36 percent of all reported cases have resulted in deaths.

“With a little common sense I know these diseases are no big deal,” said the 69-year-old Martinez who has lived in New Mexico most of his life. “This is the best place to live in the world, and with a little diligence, it can be as safe as anywhere else.”

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