Hantavirus found in African wood mouse

April 18 2006

Scientists have reported the discovery of the first African hantavirus, a type of rodent-borne virus that can cause life-threatening infections in humans.

The hantavirus infects humans when it is inhaled through aerosolized rodent urine or droppings.

A team led by Jan ter Meulen while he was a Howard Hughes Medical Institute international research scholar at the University of Conakry in the Republic of Guinea, identified the virus in an African wood mouse in Sangassou, Guinea.

"The discovery of an African hantavirus will significantly advance the understanding of hantavirus evolution and of rodent evolution," said ter Meulen.

European and Asian hantaviruses cause hemorrhagic fever with renal syndrome, a group of similar illnesses with symptoms that include fever, kidney failure, and bleeding. The viruses are carried by a number of rodents and, if left untreated, mortality can be as high as 15 percent.

Hantavirus was not seen in the Americas until 1993, when it killed approximately 20 people in the Western United States. The American virus causes hantavirus pulmonary syndrome: fever, chills, and muscle pain, followed by respiratory distress. Nearly four in 10 cases are fatal.

The research appears in the May issue of the journal Emerging

Infectious Diseases.