

# What is hantavirus, the infection that killed Betsy Arakawa, Gene Hackman's wife?

By CARLA K. JOHNSON

Updated 6:42 PM PST, March 7, 2025

Gene Hackman's wife, Betsy Arakawa, **died from hantavirus infection**, officials in New Mexico announced Friday. Hantavirus, found throughout the world, is spread by contact with rodents or their urine or feces. It does not spread between people. There is no specific treatment or cure, but early medical attention can increase the chance of survival.

## An infection can rapidly progress and become life-threatening.

*"It really **starts like the flu**: body aches, feeling poorly overall,"* said Dr. Sonja Bartolome of UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. *"Early in the illness, you really may not be able to tell the difference between hantavirus and having the flu."*

The virus can cause a severe and sometimes **deadly lung infection** called hantavirus pulmonary syndrome, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The agency began tracking the virus after a 1993 outbreak in the Four Corners region — the area where Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah meet. It was an astute physician with the Indian Health Service who first noticed a pattern of deaths among young patients, said Dr. Michelle Harkins, a pulmonologist with the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center who for years has been studying the disease and helping patients.

## A timeline of how actor Gene Hackman and Betsy Arakawa died at their New Mexico home

Gene Hackman died of heart disease, his wife died of hantavirus **about 1 week prior**, authorities say *"They were healthy, they had no medical problems and they were coming in with a cardiopulmonary arrest,"* she said, prompting the CDC's involvement as experts worked to determine what the patients had in common. The majority of U.S. cases since then have been in western states, especially the southwest. Between 1993 and 2022, there **were 864 reported U.S. cases**. New Mexico had the highest number over that time, at 122, followed by Colorado at 119.

There were seven cases confirmed in 2023 and another seven in 2024, according to the New Mexico Department of Health. **As for deaths, the state has reported 52 between 1975 and 2023.**

The CDC has offered to test samples involved in Arakawa's case to learn more about the strain of virus that infected her and to perform pathology testing.

Symptoms start **one to eight weeks after exposure** and initially can include fatigue, fever and muscle aches, according to the CDC. As the disease progresses, symptoms can include coughing, shortness of breath and tightness in the chest as the lungs fill with fluid. About **a third of people who develop respiratory symptoms from the disease can die**, the CDC says.

Despite years of research, Harkins said many questions have yet to be answered, including **why it can be mild for some people and very severe for others and how antibodies are developed**. She and other researchers have been following patients over long periods of time in hopes of finding a treatment. **"A lot of mysteries,"** she said, noting that what researchers do know is that mouse exposure is a key.

**The best way to avoid the germ is to minimize contact with rodents and their droppings.** Use protective gloves and a bleach solution for cleaning up rodent droppings. Public health experts **caution against sweeping or vacuuming which can cause virus to get into the air.**