

Plague

What is plague?

Plague is a disease that is caused by a bacterium. Current sanitation practices and medical technology have greatly reduced the occurrence of plague, but it is still a health threat in rural areas of the western United States. Plague is a highly fatal illness. Plague must be diagnosed and treated early to ensure survival.

How do I get Plague?

Plague is most often spread by the bite of infected fleas that carry the plague bacteria. These fleas usually feed on rodents, such as rock squirrels and prairie dogs. Infected rodents get sick and die. When a large population of rodents die, the fleas must find another animal to feed on, such as you or your pets. Rarely, plague is transmitted by inhaling infected droplets expelled by coughing from a person or animal with pneumonic plague.

Symptoms

People:

- Symptoms usually occur 1 to 7 days after being bitten by an infected flea or being exposed to an infected, sick or dead animal.
- Symptoms include fever, chills, fatigue, muscle pain, nausea, headache and sore throat. Also the lymph nodes (in your armpits, groin area or under your jaw bone) sometimes swell and become painful.
- If you notice these symptoms, see your health care provider immediately because the illness progresses quickly. Be sure to mention any possible exposure to plague.

Pets:

- Domestic pets may carry plague-infected fleas into homes.
- Dogs do not usually get sick, but cats that have been infected by plague-carrying fleas can develop symptoms similar to humans.
- Cats who get sick from plague can spread the disease to people that handle them.
- Cats can be treated for plague by a veterinarian. Be sure to mention possible exposure to plague such as spending time in areas where plague is present or hunting rodents.

Prevention

- Avoid areas posted with plague warning signs.
- If you live near an area with plague, treat yourself and your pets with a flea repellent. Insect repellents containing DEET work well for people. Ask your veterinarian for effective flea powder or shampoo for your pet. Flea collars have NOT proven to be effective. Be sure to read labels carefully. If there is a rodent burrow in your yard, consider dusting the burrow with a flea powder – be sure to protect yourself with a flea repellent first.
- Avoid contact with all rodents.
- Keep rodents away from and out of your home.
- If your pet catches a rodent, treat your pet for fleas.
- Wear gloves when hunting and handling wildlife.
- Call a local health department if you notice areas where large rodent populations have recently died or disappeared.

Treatment for plague

Plague is treated with antibiotics. Treatment is most effective when the illness is diagnosed early.



Eleven offices serving the residents of Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties
Administration Office: 7000 East Belleview Avenue, Suite 301 • Greenwood Village, Colorado 80111
Telephone: 303-220-9200 • Fax: 303-220-9208 • Website: www.tchd.org