

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 the western United States. Plague is a very serious illness that must be diagnosed and treated early to ensure the best outcome.

How do I get Plague?

Plague is most often spread by the bite of fleas carrying 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. Initial symptoms include fever, chills, fatigue, muscle pain, nausea, headache and sore throat.
- **Bubonic plague** is the most common form. Patients develop swollen, tender lymph nodes (called buboes) in addition to the symptoms described above. Bubonic plague does not spread from person to person.
- **Pneumonic plague** is a rare infection of the lungs (pneumonia). This type of plague can spread from person to person or from animal to person through respiratory droplets.
- **Septicemic plague** is a rare infection of the blood. Symptoms can include shock and bleeding disorders in addition to the symptoms described above. Septicemic plague does not spread from person to person.
- 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 can develop symptoms similar to humans (fever, swollen lymph nodes, and/or respiratory symptoms). Infected cats 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 (e.g., hunting rodents or spending time in areas where plague is present).

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 treatments 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.

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Eleven offices serving the residents of Adams, Arapahoe and Douglas Counties
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Plague (continued)

- 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. Bubonic plague, the most common form of infection, generally responds to medical treatment if diagnosed early in the course of disease. Pneumonic and septicemic plague are rare but extremely serious and can have high fatality rates even with treatment.