

Protect yourself from plague

What is plague?

Plague is an infectious disease of animals and fleas that can also affect humans. It is caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. In the United States, human plague occurs in western states, particularly New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, and California.

How do people get plague?

People can come into contact with the plague bacterium many different ways. The most common ways are:



- Bites of infected fleas
- Handling or skinning infected animals (such as prairie dogs, squirrels, rats and rabbits)
- Inhaling droplets from the cough of an infected person or animal (especially sick cats)

Common forms of plague

- **Bubonic plague** is the most common form of the disease and typically occurs after the bite of an infected flea. The hallmark of bubonic plague is a swollen, painful lymph gland, called a “bubo,” usually in the groin, armpit, or neck. Other symptoms include fever, chills, headache, and extreme exhaustion. A person usually becomes ill with bubonic plague 2 to 7 days after being infected. If not treated early, the bacteria can spread from the bubo to other parts of the body.
- **Septicemic plague** occurs when bacteria multiply within the bloodstream. This may occur if bubonic plague is left untreated, but it can also occur in patients without a bubo. Symptoms include high fever, exhaustion, light-headedness and abdominal pain. Septicemic plague can rapidly result in shock and organ failure.
- **Pneumonic plague** occurs when the plague bacterium infects the lungs. This happens when bacteria spread through the bloodstream to the lungs or, less often, when bacteria are inhaled directly into the lungs. Symptoms include high fever, chills, cough, breathing difficulty, and bloody sputum. Pneumonic plague is almost always fatal if not treated rapidly.



If you develop symptoms of plague, see a health care provider immediately.

Plague can be treated successfully with antibiotics, but an infected person must be treated promptly to avoid serious complications or death.

Take these steps to reduce your risk of plague

1. Reduce rodent habitat around your home, work place, and recreational areas. Remove brush, rock piles, junk, cluttered firewood, and possible rodent food supplies, such as pet and wild animal food. Make your home and outbuildings rodent-proof.

2. Wear gloves if you are handling or skinning potentially infected animals to prevent contact between your skin and the plague bacteria. Contact your local health department if you have questions about disposal of dead animals.

3. Use repellent if you think you could be exposed to rodent fleas during activities such as camping, hiking, or working outdoors. Products containing DEET can be applied to the skin as well as clothing and products containing permethrin can be applied to clothing (always follow instructions on the label).

4. Keep fleas off of your pets by regularly applying flea control products. Animals that roam freely are more likely to come in contact with plague infected animals or fleas and could bring them into homes. If your pet becomes sick, seek care from a veterinarian as soon as possible.



For general plague information:

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/plague/index.htm>

Or Call: 1-800-CDC-INFO



For information on plague risk in your area, contact your state or local health department.