

# PLAGUE

## What is plague?

Plague is a disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. These bacteria live in certain rodents (e.g., squirrels, prairie dogs or mice) and other small mammals (e.g., rabbits or hares). Fleas can become infected from feeding on these animals. Plague is a rare disease in humans.

## What are the symptoms of plague?

Symptoms appear from 1 to 8 days after exposure. Symptoms may include fever, chills, nausea, headache and body aches. There are three main forms of plague, and depending on the form, an infected person may have other symptoms.

- In **bubonic plague**, persons develop a swollen, painful lymph node (called a “bubo”) near where the infected flea bit them.
- In **septicemic plague** (bloodstream infection), persons develop stomach pain, shock and bleeding into skin and other organs.
- In **pneumonic plague** (lung infection), persons develop a cough with bloody or watery sputum and have a hard time breathing.

## How is plague spread?

Plague bacteria live in rodents and other small mammals. When fleas feed on infected animals, the fleas also get infected. The disease may then be spread to people and pets if they are bitten by the infected fleas. Persons may also get the disease through close contact with infected animals (e.g., through an animal bite or scratch or through handling animal tissues). If the disease gets into the lungs, it may be spread from person to person by droplets released when the infected person coughs.

## How long are people contagious?

Persons with plague that results in pneumonia should be isolated in the hospital until 48 hours after antibiotics have been started.

## Who gets plague?

Anyone who lives in an area where rodents and fleas are found can get plague. This includes people from *all* parts of New Mexico.

## What treatment is available for people with plague?

Specific antibiotics are prescribed by a doctor to treat plague. If plague patients do not receive early treatment, the disease can progress rapidly to death. About 14% of all human plague cases in the United States are fatal.

## Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

People who have plague will most probably be in the hospital. Persons infected with plague may spread the germ until 48 hours after proper antibiotics are started.

## How can I protect myself and my family from getting plague?

- Talk with your doctor if you have been in close contact with a person or pet who has plague. Sometimes close contacts should receive prevention antibiotics and/or watched for any signs of illness.
- Avoid contact with rodents and fleas, avoid handling sick or dead stray animals, and stay away from rodent infested places.
- Regularly treat outdoor pets with flea products.
- Control for rodents by reducing places close to your home where they might like to nest and place tight lids on garbage and pet food.

## What about my pet?

Immediately take your pet to the vet if it develops symptoms of fever, tiredness and/or loss of appetite after contact with rodents or after hunting.