

Plague

What is plague?

Plague is a disease caused by bacteria found in rodents and their fleas. There are three types of plague: bubonic plague, septicemic plague, and pneumonic plague. All three types are caused by the same bacteria, but the modes of transmission and body parts infected are different.

How common is plague?

The World Health Organization reports 1,000 to 3,000 cases of plague worldwide each year. An average of 10 to 15 cases occurs each year in the western United States, usually in rural to semi-rural areas.

How is plague spread?

Plague is spread by the bite of fleas infected with the plague bacteria. Fleas become infected by feeding on infected rodents such as chipmunks, prairie dogs, ground squirrels, and mice. Plague can also be transmitted through cough droplets of a person with pneumonic plague.

What are the symptoms of plague?

A person usually becomes ill with bubonic plague 2-6 days after being infected. Symptoms of bubonic plague include a swollen, very tender lymph gland (called a bubo), fever, chills, headache, and extreme exhaustion. Lymph glands typically appear in the groin, armpit, or neck region.

A person exposed to the bacteria through the air would become ill within 1 to 6 days of exposure. Symptoms of pneumonic plague include fever, weakness, and rapidly developing pneumonia with shortness of breath, chest pain, cough, and sometimes bloody or watery sputum. Nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain may also occur.

If left untreated, the plague bacteria can enter the bloodstream and cause septicemic plague. The symptoms of septicemic plague are fever, chills, extreme exhaustion, abdominal pain, shock, and bleeding into skin and other organs.

What is the treatment for plague?

Antibiotics should be given within 24 hours of the first symptoms in order to prevent a high risk of death. A person diagnosed with suspected plague should be hospitalized and medically isolated.

Are there complications from plague?

If left untreated, death from all types of the plague is very likely. Before antibiotic treatment was available, nearly 100% of cases were reported to be fatal. Currently, about 14% (1 in 7) of all plague cases in the United States are fatal, due to the fact that most

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cases in the US receive some antibiotic treatment during their course of treatment.

How can plague be prevented?

There is currently no vaccine available to prevent plague. Reduce exposure to rodents by eliminating sources of food and nesting places for rodents around homes, work places, and recreation areas. If you live in an area where plague is known to occur, treat pet dogs and cats for flea control. Do not handle wild rodents. Wear gloves if you are handling or skinning potentially infected animals. Use insect repellent if you think you could be exposed to rodent fleas during activities such as camping, hiking, or working outdoors.

Can plague be used as a bioweapon?

If used as a weapon, the bacteria would be made airborne for exposure by inhalation. People who inhale the bacteria would develop pneumonic plague within 1 to 6 days of exposure. Also, people who are in contact with those infected would be at risk, even if not exposed directly to the initial attack.

How do I get more information on plague?

Calhoun County Public Health Department
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Web Site: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/plague/index.htm>

World Health Organization
Web Site: http://www.who.int/health_topics/plague/en/

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This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

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