

Fact Sheet: Plague

What is Plague?

Plague is an infectious disease that affects animals and humans. It is caused by bacteria called *Yersinia pestis*. These bacteria are found in wild rodents and their fleas and occur in many areas of the world, including the U.S. Most U.S. cases occur in New Mexico, California, Arizona and Colorado, usually in isolated areas or in small clusters. Plague may occur in different forms. Bubonic plague is the most common form. Pneumonic plague is more deadly, which makes it an effective agent for a bioterrorist attack.

What are the symptoms?

It usually takes one to seven days to notice the symptoms of bubonic or pneumonic plague.

Early symptoms include:

Bubonic:

- Fever and chills
- Headache
- Weakness
- Swollen lymph nodes

Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhea may also occur.

Pneumonic:

- Rapidly developing pneumonia
- Cough (with bloody or watery sputum)
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Fever, headache, and weakness

Without treatment, plague will often progress quickly to septic shock. It is important to contact your physician as soon as you notice these symptoms.

How is it spread?

Bubonic plague does not spread from person to person. It is passed by flea bites from an infected flea or by handling an infected animal. Pneumonic plague is spread by breathing in the bacteria. Pneumonic plague can be passed from person to person through the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. A person must have direct and close (6 feet) contact with an infected individual to be exposed to the disease.

How is the disease treated?

Early treatment is essential. To reduce the chance of death, antibiotics must be given within 18 hours of the first symptoms.

How is it prevented?

Bubonic plague can be prevented by controlling the rat population. In the case of a pneumonic plague outbreak, disposable surgical masks may help prevent the spread of the bacteria from person to person. Antibiotic treatment for 7 days will protect people who have had direct, close contact with infected persons.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.