



Houston Department of
Health and Human Services

PLAGUE FACT SHEET

What is plague?

Plague is an infectious disease of animals and humans caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. This disease is also known as Bubonic plague or Black Death. Although it caused millions of deaths during the Middle Ages, today antibiotics are very effective in treating plague. However if an infected person is not treated quickly, death is likely to occur. In the United States plague is found in many wild rodents in the western part of the county. About 10-15 cases of human plague are reported yearly.

How do you get it?

People usually get plague from being bitten by a flea from a rodent that is infected with plague or by handling an infected animal. Examples of rodents likely to be infected are squirrels, prairie dogs, wood rats and chipmunks. Mice and rabbits are less likely to be a source of infection to humans. Domestic cats (and sometimes dogs) are easily infected by fleas or from eating wild rodents. Infected cats are likely to develop pneumonic or respiratory plague, which can be transmitted through the air to humans and other animals by droplets. People with pneumonic plague are the most likely to transmit the disease from person to person.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptom of plague is a very painful, swollen lymph node (gland), called a bubo. This gives the disease its most common name, bubonic plague. Symptoms of infection will begin with fever, headache and general malaise (just feeling bad) and then the swollen lymph nodes will appear. The disease can then progress to the blood stream, this is called septicemic plague. Sometimes (not always) a person will develop a lung infection, or pneumonic plague. Symptoms of this type of plague are severe pneumonia, high fever, chills and coughing up blood.

How soon do infected people get sick?

Bubonic plague usually begins 2 to 6 days after a bite from an infected flea or handling an infected animal. Septicemic plague may develop as symptoms of bubonic plague progress. Symptoms of pneumonic plague can begin as soon as 1 to 3 days.

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to plague?

You should contact your doctor immediately. Antibiotics are an effective treatment for plague, but are only useful if started early in the course of the illness. People that have been in close contact with you should also be seen by a doctor. These people may need preventive antibiotics.

How can we prevent plague?

Education is an important part of plague prevention. Plague is widespread in wild rodents in the Western States of the United States. To prevent plague everyone should remember to:

- Eliminate food and shelter for rodents in and around homes, work places and recreational areas. Clean up areas by removing brush, rock piles or junk from property. Do not leave food sources, such as pet food, or squirrel feeders, outside.
- Public health departments will usually post signs in recreational areas where plague activity in rodents has been noticed. Campers and other visitors should tell their doctor if they have been in an area with plague or if they become ill shortly after returning home.
- Do not let cats or dogs run loose. They are more likely to come in contact with an infected animal while roaming rather than in their yard. Pet owners should routinely use flea control products on their animals.

Where can I get more information on plague?

www.cdc.gov

www.tdh.state.tx.us

Source of information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)