



PLAGUE

What is plague?

Plague is a bacterial disease found in rodents and other mammals. Plague occurs naturally in many parts of the world. In the United States, plague occurs naturally in the western states, particularly Arizona, California, Colorado, and New Mexico. Plague in humans usually involves rats and their fleas. Plague takes three forms: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. It is possible that *Y. pestis* (a bacteria) could be released intentionally in a biological attack to sicken people.

Who gets plague?

People working with or visiting areas with infected rodents are at greater risk for contracting plague. Pets may get plague from infected rodents and then transmit the disease to humans.

How is plague spread?

People usually become infected by being bitten by fleas carrying the bacteria. Pneumonic plague can spread from person to person through droplets released while coughing and/or sneezing. Septicemic and bubonic plague are not spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms of plague?

- **Bubonic:** Swollen, tender lymph nodes (usually in the groin and less commonly in the armpits and neck areas), fever, chills, nausea, sore throat, and headache.
- **Pneumonic:** Fever, headache, weakness, chills, cough, difficulty breathing, pneumonia with shortness of breath, rapid shock, and death if not treated promptly.
- **Septicemic:** Fever, chills, abdominal pain, shock, and bleeding into the skin and other organs.

How soon do symptoms appear?

- **Bubonic:** A person usually becomes ill two to eight days after being infected.
- **Pneumonic:** Symptoms occur after one to three days of exposure.
- **Septicemic:** The incubation period of septicemic plague is poorly defined but likely occurs within days of exposure.



Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

Exclusion of an individual with pneumonic plague is recommended. Contact the Delaware Division of Public Health at the number at the bottom of the page for further guidance if needed.

What is the treatment for plague?

Plague is a serious illness but is treatable with commonly available antibiotics. The earlier a patient seeks medical care and receives treatment, the better their chances for a full recovery.

People in close contact with sick pneumonic plague patients may be evaluated and possibly placed under observation. Preventive antibiotic therapy may also be given, depending on the type and timing of personal contact.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of plague?

- Protect you and your family:
 - Eliminate nesting places for rodents around homes, sheds, garages, and recreation areas by removing brush, rock piles, trash, and excess firewood.
 - Avoid picking up or touching dead animals.
 - Wear gloves if you must handle sick or dead animals.
 - Report sick or dead animals to the local health department or law enforcement officials.
 - Do not let pets sleep in the bed with you. This has been shown to increase your risk of getting plague.
 - Use insect repellent that contains DEET to prevent flea bites.
- Protect your pets:
 - Treat dogs and cats for fleas regularly.
 - Keep pet food in rodent-proof containers.
 - Take sick pets to the veterinarian promptly.
 - Do not allow pets to hunt or roam in rodent habitats.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/plague/>