

Plague Confirmed in New Mexico

It may sound like a disease from the Middle Ages, but it still affects New Mexico nearly every year. It's the plague. Of the 10-20 cases annually in the United States, New Mexico is usually the most common site. In 2009, six residents living in Sandoval, Bernalillo and Santa Fe Counties were diagnosed with the plague. One of those, an eight year old boy, died.

Already in 2011, three cases in New Mexico have been confirmed in two dogs and a cat. The New Mexico Department of Health reports no humans have yet contracted the disease, and all the pets recovered after prompt antibiotic treatment.

"Plague is a bacterial disease of rodents, but it can spread to humans and pets, usually from the bites of infected fleas. If someone has been exposed, symptoms usually develop in two to six days," said Dr. Francine Olmstead, Medical Director at New Mexico Travel Health and a pandemic disease consultant. "It is a treatable disease when it's promptly diagnosed and treated with antibiotics.

"If you suddenly develop a high fever, especially if you've been bitten by a flea or handled any wild rodents, you should immediately seek medical help," said Olmstead.

When a person is infected, the plague bacteria moves through the bloodstream to the lymph nodes. The lymph nodes swell, causing the painful lumps ("buboes") that are characteristic of bubonic plague. Other symptoms are fever, headache, chills, and extreme tiredness. If bubonic plague goes untreated, the bacteria can multiply in the bloodstream and produce plague septicemia, a severe blood infection. Symptoms include fever, chills, tiredness, abdominal pain, shock, and bleeding into the skin and other organs. Untreated septicemia plague can be fatal.

Pneumonic plague, or plague pneumonia, develops when the bacteria infect the lungs. People with plague pneumonia have high fever, chills, difficulty breathing, a cough, and bloody sputum. "Plague pneumonia is the only type that can be spread by humans," said Olmstead. "It's considered a public health emergency because a cough can quickly spread the disease to others. Untreated pneumonic plague is usually fatal."

To help prevent the illness, control fleas on pets; stack woodpiles 100 feet from your home to prevent rodents from nesting in them; avoid contact with rodent nests or burrows. If a pet that has outdoor access suddenly develops a fever and seems very tired, contact your veterinarian.

The peak season is May through September. Animals that are most often infected are rock squirrels, prairie dogs, pack rats, chipmunks, rabbits and mice.

"Millions of people died of the "Black Death" plague in Europe because homes were often infested with rats, who hosted plague-infected fleas," said Olmstead. "With some precaution, plague can be almost eliminated from our world today." Olmstead, a 1997 graduate of the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, is a specialist in travel health and one of just a few thousand medical providers worldwide to have earned the Certificate of Knowledge in Travel Health, administered by the International Society of Travel Medicine.

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Background: Dr. Francine Olmstead earned her MD from the University of New Mexico School of Medicine in 1997. Since 2001, Dr. Olmstead has sub-specialized in International Travel Medicine. She has been providing consultative services to patients, medical professionals and companies regarding International Travel Health and Pandemic Planning and Awareness Education. She is the Medical Director for NM Travel Health, a division of Olmstead Health Care Services, LLC, with offices in Albuquerque and Farmington. Dr. Olmstead is also board certified in Internal Medicine.