



South Central Public Health District

Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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PLAGUE

What is plague?

Plague is a disease caused by bacteria that live in rodents and may be spread to people if they are bitten by fleas from an infected rodent. There are different forms of the disease. It is rare in the United States, but sometimes occurs in the western and southwestern parts of the country.

Who gets plague?

Anyone can get plague but it occurs more often in people working or visiting areas with infected rodents.

How is plague spread?

Most people get plague by exposure to infected fleas. People may also get the disease by handling the tissues from infected animals. If the disease gets into the lungs, it may be spread person-to-person by airborne droplets released when coughing.

What are the symptoms of plague?

Symptoms can include fever, chills, nausea, sore throat, headache and body aches. A characteristic symptom is a swollen, red lymph node on the body near where the infected flea bit the person. The disease may progress to a bloodstream infection and/or pneumonia.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms appear anywhere from one to seven days after exposure.

How is it diagnosed?

There are special laboratory tests that can be used. Samples may be taken from the swollen lymph node, blood, spinal fluid, or other body sites.

What is the treatment for plague?

Specific antibiotics (such as streptomycin, chloramphenicol and tetracyclines) may be prescribed by a doctor to treat plague.

How can plague be prevented?

Travelers to areas where plague is common should avoid contact with rodents and fleas, avoid handling sick or dead stray animals, and stay away from rodent infested places. The plague vaccine is not routinely given to travelers, but may provide some protection to persons exposed to plague at work.

Persons with plague and their clothing and belongings should be treated to kill all fleas. Rodents and fleas should be controlled where the disease has occurred. Persons with plague that results in pneumonia should be isolated in the hospital for 48 hours after antibiotics have been started. Some close contacts should also be treated with antibiotics and watch for any signs of illness.