

What can I do to prevent plague?

Do not entice any rodent or rabbit species into your yard, back porch or patio. Do not feed them.

Eliminate places that rodents can hide and breed, such as piles of lumber, broken cement, trash and weeds around your home or recreational cabin.

Make sure houses and outbuildings are as rodent-proof as possible. Keep foundations in good repair and eliminate overhanging trees from roof and windows.

When camping or hiking, do not linger in rodent-infested areas. Do not catch, play with or attempt to hand feed wild rodents.

Avoid contact with all sick and dead rodents and rabbits. Look for the presence of flies or dead animal smell as evidence of animal die-offs. Report such areas to local or state health departments, or to the appropriate campground office.



Before and while hiking, treat pants, socks, shoe tops, arms and legs with insect repellent.

Keep all dogs leashed, or better yet, leave them at home when hiking or camping. This is a good reason to restrain cats and dogs from roaming at all times.

What to remember?

Insecticide powders or shampoos should be used on cats and dogs every few days while in areas where plague may be present. The effectiveness of flea-repellant collars has not been proven.

Bites from wild animals and from cats and dogs have caused plague in humans. Such animals may be infected, carry the bacteria in their mouths or may transport infected fleas.

Cats sometimes exhibit swellings and sores around their mouth, head and neck when infected. Seek professional veterinary care for such animals, and do not handle suspiciously sick pets without gloves and face protection.

Remember that the incubation period for plague is two to six days. Consult a health-care provider if unexplained flu-like symptoms occur after exposure to rodent contact areas.



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Facts about Plague



El Paso County Public Health

“Protecting and Promoting Public Health and Environmental Quality in the Community through People, Prevention & Partnerships”

What is plague?

The bacteria that cause plague, *Yersinia pestis*, are transmitted to people through bites from infected fleas and through direct contact with animals infected with plague. Each rodent species is

host to one or more species of fleas that can be plague carriers. These fleas generally do not live on other



Rock squirrel

animals unless their natural hosts are unavailable. Rock squirrels, *Spermophilus variegates*, are closely related to California ground squirrels and are the most significant plague host in Colorado. Their principal flea, *Diamanus montanus*, is an aggressive parasite and will readily bite other animals and people.

Historical significance

Plague is widespread in the Western United States. Plague was labeled “Black Death” when it swept the world during the Middle Ages. Today, improved sanitation practices and rat control have reduced the threat of human epidemics in developed countries.

Plague in North America

Plague is believed to have been introduced to North America from Asia. It arrived about 1900 during the peak of the last worldwide outbreak, when it was spread from port to port by ships. Plague was first seen in Colorado in San Miguel County on the West Slope in 1941 and appeared in several Front Range locations in 1943. Plague now is firmly established and often is detected in rock squirrels, prairie dogs, and other species of ground squirrels and chipmunks. In El Paso County, it also is seen in fox squirrels (tree squirrels), common in city parks and Front Range residential areas.

What is the incubation period?

In humans, the incubation period — the interval between exposure and appearance of symptoms — is usually two to six days.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Typical symptoms include sudden fever and chills, severe headache, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting and a vague feeling of illness. A common symptom of plague is swollen lymph nodes. (The swollen, painful node is called a “bubo.”) Other forms of the disease include septicemic illness with no bubo developing, and pneumonic plague in which the lungs are involved. The septicemic and pneumonic forms are the most serious.

What treatment do I need if exposed?

Treatment with antibiotics is effective during the early stages of disease. If diagnosis and appropriate treatment are delayed, life-threatening complications may follow. If you have exposure to plague and symptoms appear, consult a health-care provider or hospital emergency room immediately.



Is my pet susceptible to plague?

Domestic cats and dogs can get plague by catching and eating infected rodents and rabbits or by being bitten by infected fleas. They may carry infected fleas home to their owners or directly infect other animals and their owners.

Is there a vaccine for plague?

Anti-plague vaccine is not readily available. It may be a good idea for researchers or people working with plague-infected animals to be vaccinated, but it is not necessary for the public.