

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Plague



### Burlington County Health Department

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**Public Health**  
Prevent. Promote. Protect.  
Burlington County Health Department  
*Health Starts Here*

### What is plague?

Plague, sometimes called bubonic plague, is a bacterial disease that affects humans and other mammals. Humans usually get plague after being bitten by a rodent flea that is carrying the disease or by handling an animal infected with plague. Plague occurs in rural or semi-rural areas of the western United States, primarily in New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. Many types of animals, such as rock squirrels, wood rats, ground squirrels, prairie dogs, chipmunks, mice, voles, and rabbits can be affected by plague. Wild carnivores can become infected by eating other infected animals.

### What are the symptoms of plague?

Plague symptoms depend on how the patient was exposed to the plague bacteria. The name given to the infection depends on what type symptoms the infected person has.

- **Bubonic plague:** Patients develop sudden onset of fever, headache, chills, and weakness and one or more swollen, tender and painful lymph nodes (called buboes). This form usually results from the bite of an infected flea and the bacteria multiply in the lymph node closest to where the bite happened. If the patient is not treated with the appropriate antibiotics, the bacteria can spread to other parts of the body.

- **Septicemic plague:** Patients develop fever, chills, extreme weakness, stomach pain, shock, and possibly bleeding into the skin and other organs. Skin and other tissues may turn black and die, especially on fingers, toes, and the nose. Septicemic plague can happen as the first symptom of plague, or may develop from untreated bubonic plague. This form results from bites of infected fleas or from handling an infected animal.
- **Pneumonic plague:** Patients develop fever, headache, weakness, and a quickly developing pneumonia with shortness of breath, chest pain, cough, and sometimes bloody or watery mucous. Pneumonic plague may develop from breathing in infectious droplets or may develop from untreated bubonic or septicemic plague after the bacteria spread to the lungs. The pneumonia may cause lung failure and shock. It is the most serious form of the disease and is the only form of plague that can be spread from person to person.

**Plague is a serious illness. If you are experiencing symptoms like those listed here, seek immediate medical attention. Prompt treatment with the correct medications is critical to prevent complications or death.**

## **How is plague treated?**

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

## **How can plague be prevented?**

1. Reduce rodent habitat around your home, work place, and recreational areas. Remove brush, rock piles, junk, cluttered firewood, and possible rodent food supplies, such as pet and wild animal food. Make your home and outbuildings rodent-proof.
2. Wear gloves if you are handling or skinning potentially infected animals to prevent contact between your skin and the plague

bacteria. Contact your local health department if you have questions about disposal of dead animals.

3. Use repellent if you think you could be exposed to rodent fleas during activities such as camping, hiking, or working outdoors. Products containing DEET can be applied to the skin as well as clothing and products containing permethrin can be applied to clothing (always follow instructions on the label).
4. Keep fleas off your pets by applying flea control products. Animals that roam freely are more likely to come in contact with plague infected animals or fleas and could bring them into homes. If your pet becomes sick, seek care from a veterinarian as soon as possible.
5. Do not allow dogs or cats that roam free in endemic areas to sleep on your bed.

## **Where can you get more information?**

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/plague>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609)-265-5548.
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at **(609) 588-7465** or on the NJDOH Website at <http://www.state.nj.us/health>.

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