



Colorado Department
of Public Health
and Environment

NEWS RELEASE

Office of Communications
Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

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Three additional Colorado residents identified with plague

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment has identified three additional Colorado residents with plague, for a total of four cases. The investigation of the original case identified three individuals, each of whom had direct contact with the previously reported dog that had died of plague. They all had mild symptoms, were treated with appropriate antibiotics, recovered, and no longer are contagious. The initial patient remains hospitalized.

The dog likely was exposed to a prairie dog or rabbit with plague-infected fleas in eastern Adams County.

Tri-County Health Department officials, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment are continuing to work together to investigate these cases and prevent further illnesses. Although person-to-person transmission of plague is extremely rare, individuals who may have been exposed through close contact with the four cases have been identified, and have received antibiotic treatment or are being monitored for symptoms when indicated.

Plague is spread by fleas from rodents, most commonly prairie dogs. Flea samples recently collected from eastern Adams County tested positive for plague bacteria. Tri-County Health Department staff members have gone door-to-door in the area with information about plague and to assess prairie dog populations. People and pets walking in open spaces and trails should avoid contact with prairie dogs, rabbits and other rodents.

Contact your physician if you develop a high fever and other plague symptoms following a fleabite or direct contact with dead rodents, or exposure to a sick cat or dog that may have had contact with plague-infected rodents. Symptoms of plague include a sudden onset of high fever, muscle pain, nausea and vomiting, or a general feeling of being ill. Individuals with pneumonic plague (the lung form) develop fever, headache, weakness, shortness of breath, chest pain and coughing, which can lead to respiratory failure. Pneumonic plague is the most serious form of the disease and is the only form of plague that can be spread from person to person (by

infectious droplets from coughing). Although human cases occur infrequently, plague can be severe and potentially life-threatening if not detected and quickly treated with common antibiotics.

Dr. Jennifer House, public health veterinarian at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, encourages people take the following precautions to prevent plague exposure:

- Do not directly handle any dead rodents, including prairie dogs, rabbits, squirrels, mice and rats.
- Keep pets away from wildlife, especially dead rodents.
- Don't let dogs or cats hunt prairie dogs or other rodents.
- Don't allow pets to roam freely.
- Treat pets for fleas according to a veterinarian's advice.
- Do not feed prairie dogs or other rodents. This attracts them to your property, brings them in close contact with other rodents and increases the risk of disease transmission.
- Be aware of rodent populations in your area, and report sudden die-offs or multiple dead animals to your local health department.

Plague often is identified when there is an unusual die-off of prairie dogs in an area. When an infected animal dies, the fleas leave the carcass to find another host, thus spreading the disease. Most human plague cases occur when humans are bitten by infected fleas. Less commonly, people are infected by direct contact with blood or tissues from an infected animal or from pets (primarily cats) that become infected and transmit the disease. Since 1957, Colorado has identified 60 cases of human plague, nine (15 percent) of which were fatal.

Additional information on plague can be found at: <http://www.cdc.gov/plague>

Contact CO-HELP (Colorado Health Education Line for the Public) at 303-389-1687, or outside the metro area call 1-877-462-2911 for more information or to report a dead prairie dog.