

News Release

Plague Confirmed in Larimer County; Fatal Human Case

Department: Health & Environment

Comments Off

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A young man from the Cherokee Park area was recently confirmed to have died from plague on June 8. This is the first Larimer County resident confirmed to have contracted plague since 1999, but a Weld County resident camping in Larimer County in 2004 was likely infected in the Red Feather Lakes area.

While the investigation is still ongoing, the individual may have contracted the disease from fleas on a dead rodent or other animal on the family acreage. The Larimer County Department of Health and Environment is coordinating the investigation, working with the experts from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the State Health Department, and the Larimer County Coroner's office.

Because many people visited the family's home after the young man's death – before the cause of death was identified – the family is reaching out to those who visited their home or attended the scattering of his ashes on the property. There is a small chance that others might have been bitten by infected fleas, so anyone who was on the family's land in the last 7 days should seek medical attention immediately if a fever occurs. The last exposure to others was likely on June 14.

Those who attended services *in Fort Collins* on June 10 or June 13 are not at any risk, nor is there any risk from past contact with the deceased, nor recent contact with his family members and friends.

Plague can spread through rodent populations in a localized area – often resulting in mass animal “die-offs.” The only animals with confirmed plague so far this year in Larimer County were in an area of Soapstone Natural area this is not open to the public.

In recent decades, an average of seven human plague cases are reported each year nationwide according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Most human cases in the United States are scattered in rural areas and occur predominantly in two regions:

- Northern New Mexico, northern Arizona, and southern Colorado
- California, southern Oregon, and far western Nevada

Bubonic plague is the most common form of the disease in humans (about 80% of cases) Symptoms begin two to six days after the bite of an infected flea, or contact with an infected rodent or cat. Typical symptoms include swollen lymph nodes, sudden onset of fever or chills, severe headache, extreme exhaustion, and a general feeling of illness. Bubonic plague can be successfully treated when diagnosed promptly. If you have had a possible exposure to infected rodents or fleas and are experiencing these symptoms, consult a physician as soon as possible.

Septicemic plague occurs when the bacteria enter the bloodstream directly and spread throughout the body. Pneumonic plague can occur when bacteria are directly inhaled, or can be from secondary spread

of bubonic or septicemic plague. The recent fatal case appears to have had a septicemic plague infection. These forms are highly fatal unless treated promptly; unfortunately there are often no localizing signs to suggest plague.

Cats are infected from flea bites or by direct contact with infected rodents. Plague infected cats will generally have a history of roaming freely in rural or semi-rural areas and their owners often report that they are known predators.

Infected cats frequently exhibit swelling and sores around the mouth, head, and neck, and appear to be ill. Seek veterinary care for such animals. Since domestic cats and dogs can carry infected fleas into the home environment, it is also important to consult your veterinarian for information about flea control for your pets. While dogs rarely appear sick from plague, it is still important that they are treated for fleas as they can still carry them into the home.

TIPS TO PREVENT PLAGUE

- Avoid contact with all sick and dead rodents and rabbits. Look for the presence of blow flies or dead animal smell as evidence of animal die-offs. Prairie dog colonies that suddenly are not active may also be due to plague activity in the area. Report such die-offs to Larimer County Health Department at 498-6775.
- While hiking, treat pants, socks, shoe tops, arms and legs with insect repellents.
- Keep your pets from roaming and hunting and talk to your veterinarian about using an appropriate flea control product.
- Sick pets should be examined promptly by a veterinarian.
- If you hunt or trap rabbits or carnivorous wild animals, wear gloves and a respiratory mask while skinning or handling these animals. Fresh pelts may be treated with flea powder.
- Bites from wild carnivores and from cats and dogs have caused human plague. Such animals may be infected, carry the bacteria in their mouths or may transport infective fleas. If you are bitten, follow-up with your health care provider.
- DO NOT feed or entice any rodent or rabbit species into your yard, back porch, or patio.
- Eliminate rodent habitat, such as piles of lumber, broken cement, trash and weeds around your home, outbuildings and cabins.
- When outdoors, minimize exposure in rodent-infested areas. Do not catch, play with, or attempt to hand feed wild rodents.

For more information on plague, visit www.cdc.gov/plague .