

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES

Communicable Disease Control

Plague

What is plague?

Plague is a severe disease caused by infection with a type of bacteria found in rodents and transmitted to man by fleas. Plague can exist in different forms in people and can require strict isolation and disinfection procedures. The disease is relatively rare in the United States and is limited to the west and southwestern parts of the country.

Who gets plague?

People working or visiting areas with infected rodents are at greater risk of contracting this disease. There has been one report of human plague in Montana.

How is plague spread?

The most common means of transmission is by exposure to infected fleas. Other important sources include the handling of tissues from infected animals (especially rabbits or rodents), airborne droplets from humans or household pets with plague pneumonia or by laboratory exposure.

What are the symptoms of plague?

The initial symptom is usually a swollen, inflamed and tender lymph gland in the body near where the infected flea bit the person. Fever is usually present. The disease may progress to a generalized blood infection that may result in pneumonia. People with pneumonic plague may transmit the disease to other people when coughing.

How soon do symptoms occur?

Symptoms usually begin within one to six days after exposure to the plague bacteria.

Does past infection with plague make a person immune?

Immunity after plague recovery is variable, and may not provide complete protection.

What is the treatment for plague?

Certain antibiotics such as streptomycin, tetracyclines and chloramphenicol are effective in treating the disease.

What can be done to prevent the spread of plague?

Animals in Montana may carry plague. Care should be taken by hunters and campers to avoid fleas from wild animals. Pets should be defleaed. When human or animal cases have been identified, efforts to control the rodent and flea populations by the use of rodenticides and insecticides should be used.