

## Plague in Western U.S. – Summer 2006

There have been a number plague reports this year in the western U.S. New Mexico confirmed at least five cases of human plague with one death from the septicemic form. In Colorado, a man tested positive for plague in July. A woman in Los Angeles was hospitalized in spring with bubonic plague. The woman was exposed to fleas in her Los Angeles home. This case is unusual because it occurred in an urban area, whereas most bubonic plague outbreaks happen in rural communities.

Human cases in the U.S. occur mostly in rural areas, with an average of 10 to 15 cases each year nationwide. Bubonic plague in humans is not contagious, but if left untreated it can turn into pneumonic plague, which can be spread from person to person. Bubonic plague is usually transmitted to humans from the bites of fleas from infected rodents. Plague is caused by *Yersinia pestis*. Symptoms usually show up 2 to 6 days after infection and include fever, chills, weakness, and swollen, painful lymph nodes. A few people get pneumonia as the first sign. The infection then spreads to other parts of the body. If this disease is not treated right away, many people who get sick will not survive.

Pets, in addition to people can break with plague. A cat in northern Arizona tested positive. The local health department said fleas collected from prairie dog burrows about 2 miles away from the home where the cat lives also tested positive for plague. In Southwest Colorado, 7 animals -- including squirrels, household cats, and prairie dogs -- tested positive for plague this summer.

Cats can become infected from flea bites or by direct contact with infected rodents. Infected cats can have swellings and sores around the mouth, head and neck and appear ill. Pet owners should seek veterinary care for these animals. Because domestic cats can carry infected fleas into the home, it is important to consult a veterinarian for information about flea control for pets. People can rarely get plague from an infected animal.

In the United States, most of the human plague cases occur in two regions: (1) Northern New Mexico, northern Arizona, and southern Colorado, and (2) California, southern Oregon, and far western Nevada. A July 17 Press Release from the California Department of Health Services urged visitors and citizens to take precautions against plague when visiting rural picnic spots and campgrounds and watching out for fleas on the pets they take with them

To protect you and your children from plague:

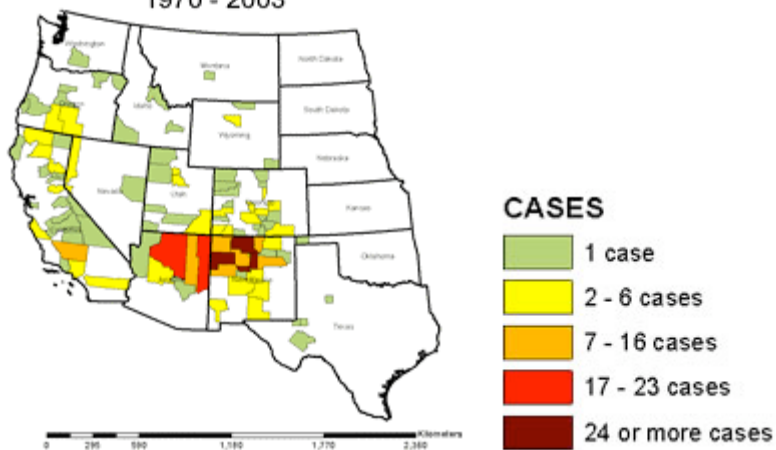
- Do not pick up or touch dead animals.
- If plague has recently been found in your area, report any observations of sick or dead animals to the local health department or law enforcement officials.
- Eliminate sources of food and nesting places for rodents around homes, work places, and recreation areas; remove brush, rock piles, junk, cluttered firewood, and potential food supplies, such as pet and wild animal food. Make your home rodent-proof.
- If you anticipate being exposed to rodent fleas, apply insect repellents to clothing and skin, according to label instructions, to prevent flea bites. Wear gloves when handling potentially infected animals.
- If you live in areas where rodent plague occurs, treat pet dogs and cats for flea control regularly and do not allow these animals to roam freely.

For more information about plague:

1. CDC. Summary of Notifiable Diseases, 2004. MMWR. June 16, 2006 / 53(53);1-79
2. [http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/browse\\_by\\_diseases.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/healthypets/browse_by_diseases.htm)
3. Facts about plague in California.  
<http://www.dhs.ca.gov/dcdc/disb/pdf/Plague%20brochure%20final.pdf>  
<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/plague/trainingmodule/1/09humancases.htm>

Figure 1.

Plague Cases, by county, Western U.S.  
1970 - 2003



(From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)

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