

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Secretary Catherine Torres, M.D.

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Department of Health Reports First Human Plague Case in New Mexico and the U.S. for 2011

Santa Fe County Man is Recovering after Hospitalization

(Santa Fe) -- The New Mexico Department of Health confirmed today a case of bubonic plague in a 58-year-old man from Santa Fe County who was hospitalized and is recovering. This is the first case of plague confirmed in New Mexico this year and is the first human case of plague reported in the United States in 2011.

There have also been two cases of plague in dogs from Santa Fe County and one case in a cat from Rio Arriba County this spring.

“Whenever there is a human case of plague, the Department of Health takes several steps to ensure the safety of the immediate family, neighbors, and health care providers,” said Department of Health Cabinet Secretary, Dr. Catherine Torres. “We inform neighbors door-to-door about plague found in the area and educate them on reducing their risk. We determine whether individuals close to the patient may also have been exposed to the plague and recommend preventative treatment when necessary.”

Dr. Paul Ettestad, public health veterinarian for the Department of Health, said plague activity usually begins to increase in the spring and continues into the summer months so people need to take precautions to avoid rodents and their fleas which can expose them to plague. Plague is a bacterial disease of rodents and is generally transmitted to humans through the bites of infected fleas, but can also be transmitted by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, wildlife and pets.

“Dead rodents should either be buried in the ground using a long shovel or double bagged and thrown away in the garbage if that is allowed in your area,” Dr. Ettestad said. “This will help keep pets and children from handling rodent carcasses and potentially being exposed to plague.”

To prevent plague, the Department of Health recommends:

- Avoid sick or dead rodents and rabbits, and their nests and burrows.
- Keep your pets from roaming and hunting and talk to your veterinarian about using an appropriate flea control product.
- Clean up areas near the house where rodents could live, such as woodpiles, brush piles, junk and abandoned vehicles.

- Sick pets should be examined promptly by a veterinarian.
- See your doctor about any unexplained illness involving a sudden and severe fever.
- Put hay, wood, and compost piles as far as possible from your home.
- Don't leave your pet's food and water where mice can get to it.

Symptoms of plague in humans include sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, and weakness. In most cases there is a painful swelling of the lymph node in the groin, armpit or neck areas. Plague symptoms in cats and dogs are fever, lethargy and loss of appetite. There may be a swelling in the lymph node under the jaw. With prompt diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment, the fatality rate in people and pets can be greatly reduced.

In New Mexico, there were no human cases in 2010 and six human cases of plague in 2009: three from Santa Fe County, two from Bernalillo County and one from Sandoval County. One of the Santa Fe County cases was a fatal case in an 8-year-old boy.

For more information, including fact sheets in English and Spanish, go to the Department of Health's website at: <http://www.health.state.nm.us/ERD/HealthData/plague.shtml>.