

FactSheet

Para Su Información

Plague

What is plague?

Plague is a disease caused by the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, which can be carried by fleas that feed on infected rodents. *Y. pestis* is on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) list of possible bioterrorism agents.

How is plague spread?

The most common source of plague in humans has been the bite of infected fleas. Other sources include the handling of tissues of infected animals, especially rodents and rabbits.

Pets, particularly house cats, may carry plague-infected fleas into homes and occasionally transmit infection by their bites or scratches. Cats or humans infected with plague in the throat or lungs may spread plague in airborne droplets.

Careless handling of laboratory cultures can also result in plague. In the event of a biological attack with plague, the bacteria would be spread through the air.

What are the symptoms of plague?

Plague appears in humans in one of three forms.

- Bubonic plague is the most common.
- Septicemic plague occurs when the bacterium enters the blood stream.
- Pneumonic plague affects the lungs.

Bubonic Plague

Symptoms may include: high fever, chills, severe malaise (feeling unwell), headaches, delirium, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and/or coma. The most distinctive sign is swelling of the lymph nodes in the groin, armpits, or neck. The swollen lymph nodes are

called buboes. These become painful, pus-filled, and may rupture and ooze fluid.

Septicemic plague

Symptoms of septicemic plague are similar to bubonic, only without an increase in the size of the lymph nodes. This form may be serious because it can be difficult to diagnose.

Pneumonic plague

Symptoms of pneumonic plague include: cough, bloody sputum, high fever and chills.

Any form of plague can be fatal if not treated. Septicemic and pneumonic plagues are more often fatal than bubonic because they are harder to recognize. Fortunately, these types of plague are less common.

Is there a treatment for plague?

Doctors can prescribe antibiotics for plague. To be effective, treatment should be started early. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal.

Is there a vaccine for plague?

A plague vaccine is no longer manufactured or available in the United States.

Should I buy a gas mask?

Purchasing a gas mask is not currently recommended for the following reasons:

- If an attack occurs, the types of agents and concentrations are unknown and therefore it is almost impossible to accurately select a mask.
- Gas masks may reduce, but do not eliminate exposure to chemical or biological agents. They do not eliminate the risk of infection.

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- There may be no obvious warning in the event of a biological or chemical attack, so you would not be able to determine when to put the mask on.
- Gas masks may help protect your lungs, however, some chemical agents may be absorbed through the skin or eyes.
- Negative pressure masks can be dangerous for children or people with respiratory problems.

Should I have my own supply of antibiotics?

There is currently no justification for stockpiling antibiotics. Antibiotics could cause side effects and should only be taken with medical supervision.

There are a number of different germs a bioterrorist might use to carry out an attack. Many antibiotics are effective for a variety of diseases, but there isn't one antibiotic that is effective against all diseases. Thus, no single pill can protect against all types of biological weapon attacks.

Keeping a supply of antibiotics on hand poses other problems because the antibiotics have a limited "shelf life" before they lose their strength.

How can I protect my family or myself?

Local, state, and federal government agencies have been active in preparing responses to chemical, biological, and nuclear threats.

In the event of a credible plague threat, appropriate measures will be taken to protect the health of the public. Individuals are strongly cautioned against stockpiling antibiotics or self-medicating in order to prevent plague.

Where can I get more information?

Additional information about plague can be found on the CDC's website at www.cdc.gov.



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