



## Plague

### What is plague?

Plague is an infectious disease that affects humans and animals. It is caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*. It is found in rodents and their fleas and can be found naturally in many areas of the world, including the United States. Outbreaks in people tend to occur in areas where housing and hygiene conditions are poor, both in rural communities and cities. Outbreaks are usually linked with infected rats and rat fleas that live in the home.

### How is plague spread?

Fleas that have the bacteria spread plague by biting humans and other mammals. It is possible to get plague from another person if the person has plague pneumonia. Plague pneumonia is spread by individuals coming in contact with an infected person who is coughing and spreading droplets containing the bacteria. A person usually becomes ill two to six days after exposure to the bacteria.

### Are there different forms of plague?

Plague can occur in three forms:

- Pneumonic (lung)
- Bubonic (from the bite of an infected flea)
- Septicemic (blood)

These may occur separately or in combination.

### What are the differences and symptoms?

- Pneumonic plague affects the lungs. It can spread from close and direct person to person contact through the air. It may also occur in a person with bubonic or septicemic plague, if untreated and the bacteria spread to the lungs. Breathing in the bacteria released in the air, which could happen in a terrorist attack is also a cause.

The first signs of illness are fever, chills, cough, difficulty breathing and sometimes bloody or watery sputum. The pneumonia goes on for up to four days and may cause breathing problems and shock. Without early treatment, patients may die.

- Bubonic plague is the most common form. It occurs when an infected flea bites a person or when something contaminated with the bacteria enters through a break in the skin. Bubonic plague is not spread person to person. Symptoms are a swollen, tender lymph gland, fever, headache, chills and exhaustion.
- Septicemic plague occurs when the amount of germs in the blood from bubonic plague or pneumonic plague increases and spreads directly through the bloodstream. This type of plague is not spread person to person. Patients have fever, chills, abdominal pain, shock and bleeding into the skin and other organs.

### What is the treatment for plague?

A person suspected to have plague should be hospitalized and kept away from other people. Lab tests should be done and antibiotic treatment should begin as soon as possible. People who have had direct, close contact with an infected person should receive antibiotic treatment for seven days to protect them from getting the illness. Wearing close-fitting surgical mask also protects against infection.

For more information contact the Guilford County Department of Public Health at 336-641-7777 or visit our website at [www.myguilford.com](http://www.myguilford.com) or on plague, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) or the World Health Organization at [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)