

Basic Fact Sheet – Plague in Animals
Texas Department of Health, Zoonosis Control Division

What is plague?

Plague is a disease caused by bacteria (*Yersinia pestis*). It occurs naturally in parts of western Texas. It primarily affects rodents (such as rats, squirrels, and prairie dogs), but it can affect cats and people.

How can an animal get plague?

Natural infection happens through the bites of infected fleas or when a cat eats a rodent infected with plague. Infection can also occur if bacteria enter the lungs through inhalation (breathing in). This form of the disease is called pneumonic plague. Pneumonic plague can easily be spread through coughing and sneezing.

What are the signs of infection?

Signs of plague in wildlife may include finding a large number of dead animals. Cats with pneumonic plague have a high fever, sneezing, coughing, and discharge from the nose. Some may have a draining sore below the jaw. Many cats will die. Although infected dogs may not have any signs at all, some may have fever with a sore under the jaw. Dogs usually recover.

How is plague diagnosed?

A veterinarian may be able to diagnose plague by using a microscope to check material from the draining sore. A more accurate diagnosis may require blood samples.

How is plague treated?

Animals thought to have plague can be treated with antibiotics. However, treatment must be started early to be effective. Animals should be treated only in a veterinary hospital because the disease is contagious (can be easily spread) to people.

Is a plague vaccine available?

There is no vaccine available for animals. There is a vaccine with limited availability for humans in areas where plague occurs. The vaccine is of limited value and may not be effective in the case of inhalation of the bacteria.

Can infected animals spread plague?

Yes. Animals with pneumonic plague are highly contagious to people and other animals. Sneezing or coughing by an infected animal can spread the bacteria in the air. Plague can also be spread through the bites of fleas, so it is important to control fleas in and around the home and on pets.

What is done with animals that die of plague?

The body should be sprayed with insecticide and handled carefully to prevent fleas from moving to other animals or humans. There are no special burial or disposal requirements.

How can I protect my animals and myself?

Isolate (separate) infected animals to prevent spread of the disease. A physician should treat everyone having contact with an infected animal. A veterinarian can prescribe antibiotics for all animals that were in contact with an infected animal. Use flea control on pets and in the home. Disinfect areas in contact with the infected animals with a mixture of one part household bleach (0.5% hypochlorite) in nine parts water. Apply to all surfaces and wash off with water after waiting at least 30 minutes.