

Plague

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What is plague?

Plague is a potentially severe disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. People can become infected through the bite of an infected flea; contact with infected animals, their tissues, or body fluids; or by inhaling infectious droplets from a person with pneumonic plague.

There are three forms of plague:

- **Bubonic plague** is the most common form and is characterised by swollen, painful lymph nodes (called buboes), usually in the neck, armpit, or groin.
- **Pneumonic plague** affects the lungs and is the only form of plague that can spread from person to person through respiratory droplets.
- **Septicaemic plague** occurs when infection spreads through the bloodstream.

Transmission

People become infected through

- Being bitten by infected fleas
- Unprotected contact with infectious bodily fluids or contaminated materials
- Inhaling respiratory droplets from an individual with pneumonic plague

Symptoms

Symptoms usually develop within 1 to 8 days of infection and vary by form of plague. Common symptoms include fever, chills, and weakness.

- **Bubonic plague:** Swollen, painful lymph nodes (buboes), headache, fever, and chills.
- **Pneumonic plague:** Chest pain, cough, shortness of breath, and difficulty breathing. The cough may produce bloody or watery sputum.
- **Septicaemic plague:** Severe weakness, abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea, bleeding into the skin or other organs, and in severe cases, shock and organ failure.

Without prompt treatment, plague can progress rapidly and become life-threatening.

Advice for travellers

You can reduce your risk of plague by avoiding flea bites, contact with infected animals, and close contact with sick people.

To help prevent plague while travelling:

- Avoid contact with sick people, particularly those with symptoms of respiratory illness.
- Avoid handling wild animals, whether alive or dead.
- Avoid areas where rodents are common, including rodent nests and burrows.
- Use an insect repellent containing DEET on exposed skin.
- Wear long-sleeved clothing, long pants, and socks in areas where plague occurs.
- Consider treating clothing and gear with permethrin.
- Keep accommodation free from rodents where possible.
- Protect pets against fleas and avoid letting pets that roam outdoors sleep on beds.

People exposed to plague may be prescribed preventive antibiotics.

See [Plague page](#) on Global Health Threat sites for further information, news updates and travel restrictions.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What locations are at risk for plague?

Plague exists throughout the world, except in Oceania. Outbreaks of plague have occurred in Africa, Asia and South America. However, it is consistently present in China, Congo (DRC), and Madagascar.

How is it transmitted?

People usually become infected with plague through bites from infected fleas. Infection can also occur through direct contact with infected animals or their tissues, especially when handling sick or dead rodents, rabbits, hares, or cats. Dogs and other pets may carry infected fleas into the home. These exposures most commonly cause bubonic plague or septicemic plague. In some cases, bubonic plague can spread to the lungs and become pneumonic plague.

Cats can become infected by hunting or eating infected rodents and may transmit the bacteria to people through bites, scratches, or respiratory droplets if they develop pneumonic plague.

Person-to-person transmission occurs when someone inhales respiratory droplets from a person with pneumonic plague. Overcrowded conditions may increase the risk of spread. Person-to-person transmission of bubonic plague is very rare but may occur through direct contact with infected body fluids or tissues, including pus from plague buboes.

Who is most at risk?

Anyone can get plague; however, some people are at higher risk:

- People who live and / or work in or visit rodent-infested areas.
- People who live in rural or semi-rural areas.
- Healthcare workers.
- Veterinarians.
- Hunters.
- People visiting areas where rodents have recently died.

How long does it take to develop symptoms?

People typically develop symptoms of bubonic or septicemic plague 1 to 7 days after exposure. For person-to-person transmission of pneumonic plague, symptoms develop 1 to 4 days after exposure.

How is plague diagnosed?

Laboratory tests on blood, sputum and fluid samples from buboes confirm the diagnosis of plague.

How long are infected people contagious?

A patient with plague is typically contagious until 48 to 72 hours after antibiotic treatment has commenced.

However, follow guidance from the treating physician and local public health authorities on quarantine and case and contact management.

Are there any complications?

If not treated, plague can be fatal. Pneumonic plague progresses rapidly within 2 days of infection, leading to complications such as respiratory failure and shock. If antibiotics are not taken within 24 hours after symptoms appear, the infection is usually fatal.

Plague can lead to gangrene (tissue death due to disrupted blood flow) or, very rarely, meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord).

Can it be treated?

Plague can be treated successfully with antibiotics, especially when treatment starts early. Without prompt treatment, plague can cause serious complications and may be fatal. Early diagnosis and treatment greatly improve the chance of recovery.

Is there a vaccine?

There is currently no widely available vaccine to prevent plague. Prevention focuses on avoiding flea bites, reducing contact with rodents and other potentially infected animals, and seeking prompt medical care if symptoms develop after a possible exposure.

How can I protect myself?

Prevent plague by avoiding flea bites (through flea control and an insect repellent), avoiding direct contact with infected animals, and avoiding contact with sick people. People exposed to plague receive preventive antibiotics.

- Observe strict hygiene measures.
- Avoid contact with sick people.
- Avoid crowds and crowded areas, especially where plague has recently been reported. These areas may include markets and public transport.
- Avoid flea bites in plague areas by:
 - Using insect repellents containing DEET when outdoors.
 - Applying permethrin to clothing.
 - Wearing clothing that covers most of your body (long sleeves, long pants, socks).
- Avoid animals, alive or dead, and do not feed wildlife.
- Avoid rodent nests or burrows.
- Keep your home free from rodents.
- Keep pets free of fleas.
- In plague areas, do not allow pets to sleep on the bed if they roam free outdoors.

Post-exposure prevention (PEP)

People exposed to plague, such as through close contact with a pneumonic plague case or direct contact with infected body fluids/body tissues, can receive post-exposure antibiotic treatment. They may also be monitored for symptom development.

What if I have been exposed? Will I be quarantined?

If you believe you have been exposed to plague, contact public health authorities or your health care provider immediately. They will instruct you on quarantine requirements and most likely conduct contact tracing. People exposed to plague, such as a close contact of a pneumonic plague case, or direct contact with infected body fluids/body tissues can receive post exposure antibiotic treatment.

In general, quarantine can be mandatory or voluntary. Health authorities may have a designated facility for group quarantine or may allow home monitoring. The recommended length of quarantine for plague is 6 to 8 days. **The exclusion / monitoring period may differ between locations. The local health authority guidelines should be followed.**

Can I travel?

If you think you have been exposed to plague and/or have signs and symptoms of plague, **do not travel**. Seek medical care and guidance until you are cleared to travel.

During an outbreak, at border points, authorities may introduce entry and exit screening.

If you have risk of exposure to plague, contact public health authorities or a medical professional for monitoring and advice.

Disclaimer:

This information has been developed for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Should you have questions or concerns about any topic described here, please consult your healthcare professional.