

# Protect yourself from plague



## What is plague?

Plague occurs naturally in the western United States, particularly Arizona, California, Colorado, and New Mexico. The plague bacterium (*Yersinia pestis*) is transmitted by fleas and cycles naturally among wild rodents. Plague can also infect humans and their pets.

## How do people get plague?

- Bites of infected fleas
- Touching or skinning infected animals (such as prairie dogs, squirrels, rats, and rabbits)
- Inhaling droplets from the cough of an infected person or animal (especially sick cats)

## Common forms of plague

**Bubonic plague** is the most common form of plague. It usually occurs after the bite of an infected flea. The key feature of bubonic plague is a swollen, painful lymph node, usually in the groin, armpit or neck. Other symptoms include fever, chills, headache, and extreme exhaustion. A person usually becomes ill with bubonic plague 1 to 6 days after being infected. If not treated early, the bacteria can spread to other parts of the body and cause septicemic or pneumonic plague.

**Septicemic plague** occurs when plague bacteria multiply in the bloodstream. Symptoms include high fever, exhaustion, light-headedness, and abdominal pain. Septicemic plague can quickly cause shock and organ failure.

**Pneumonic plague** occurs when plague bacteria infect the lungs. Symptoms include high fever, chills, cough, difficulty breathing, and coughing up bloody mucus. Pneumonic plague is almost always fatal if not treated rapidly.

**If you develop symptoms of plague, see a health care provider immediately.**

Plague can be treated successfully with antibiotics, but an infected person must be treated promptly to avoid serious complications or death.

## Protect yourself if you live in an area where plague occurs:

### Protect you and your family

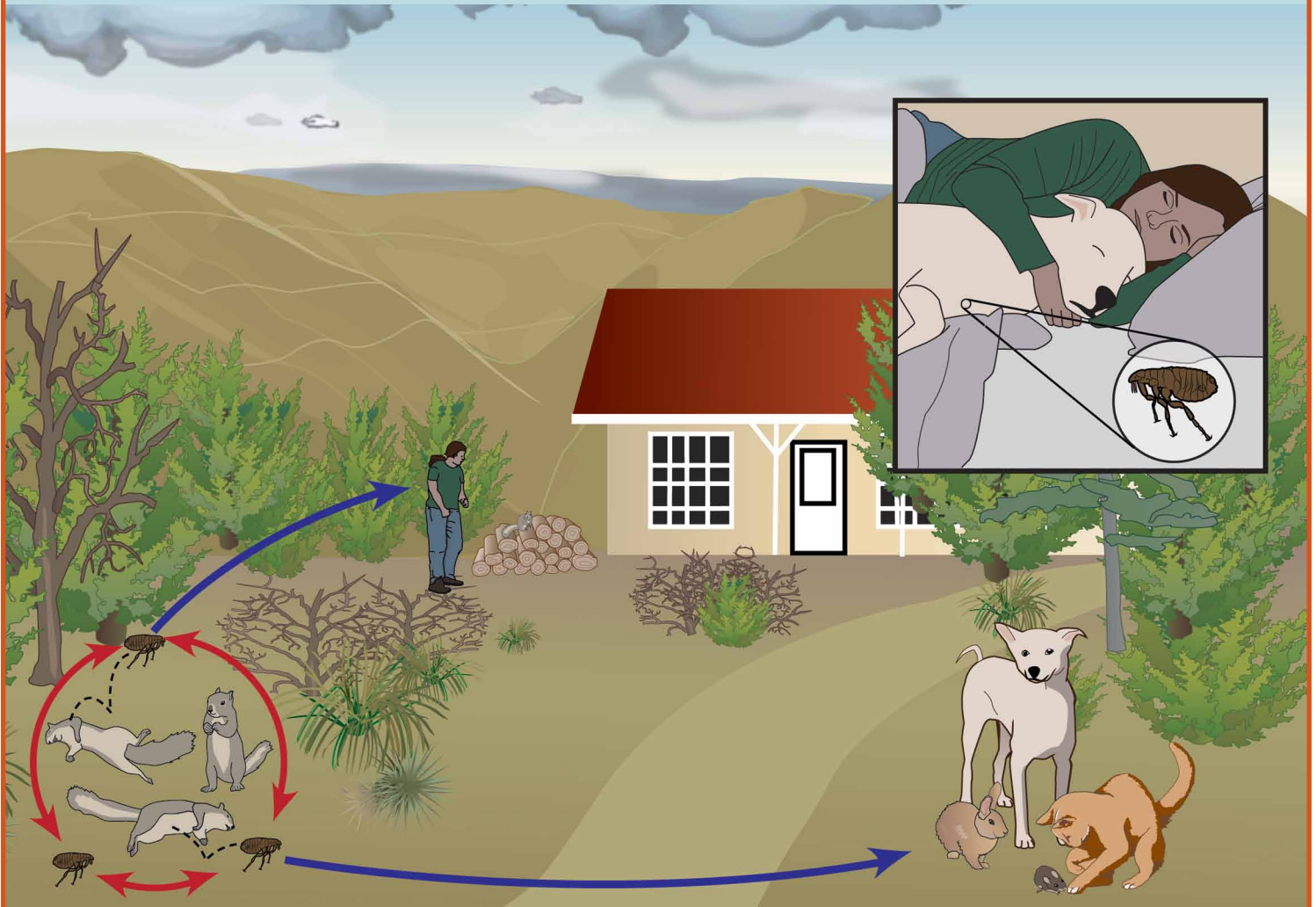
1. Eliminate nesting places for rodents around homes, sheds, garages, and recreation areas by removing brush, rock piles, trash, and excess firewood.
2. Avoid picking up or touching dead animals.
3. Wear gloves if you must handle sick or dead animals.
4. Report sick or dead animals to the local health department or law enforcement officials.
5. Do not let pets sleep in the bed with you. This has been shown to increase your risk of getting plague.
6. Use insect repellent that contains DEET to prevent flea bites.

### Protect your pets

1. Treat dogs and cats for fleas regularly.
2. Keep pet food in rodent-proof containers.
3. Take sick pets to the veterinarian promptly.
4. Do not allow pets to hunt or roam in rodent habitat, such as prairie dog colonies.

# Plague in Humans

Human plague is often preceded by an outbreak or “epizootic” in which large numbers of susceptible rodents die. When this happens, hungry infected fleas leave the dead rodents and seek blood from other hosts, including humans and domestic pets. Studies suggest that in the southwestern U.S. epizootics are more likely to occur during cooler summers that follow wet winters.



Humans and domestic animals that are bitten by fleas from dead animals are at risk for contracting plague, especially during an epizootic. Cats usually become very ill from plague and can directly infect humans when they cough infectious droplets into the air. Dogs are less likely to be ill, but they can still bring plague-infected fleas into the home. In addition to flea bites, people can be exposed while handling skins or flesh of infected animals.

## For more information, please contact:

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