

Plague



- Plague is a bacterial disease of squirrels, prairie dogs and other small mammals that can also rarely infect humans and domestic animals.

Species Affected in Colorado

- Ground squirrels, prairie dogs
- Other small mammals
- Wild and domestic cats
- Less commonly, other species.

What to Look For

- Multiple dead prairie dogs or loss of prairie dog activity in a colony.
- Swollen lymph nodes on cats
- Fever or other nonspecific signs of disease in dogs or other species with access to prairie dog habitat.



Flea from a prairie dog. Most plague cases result from flea bites. Photo credit: Dan Tripp, CPW

Cause and Transmission

Plague is caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*. Infection can be fatal in species including ground squirrels, prairie dogs and other small mammals. Infection is usually transmitted through bites from infected fleas. Wild carnivores and pets can become infected from eating infected carcasses, and many mammalian species can be infected through flea bites. In cats, infections often cause swelling of the lymph nodes of the neck, called “bubos”. Direct transmission from cats to humans is possible. Dogs are typically resistant to the disease, but infection can occur and dogs can rarely transmit the disease to humans. Hunters and trappers may be infected when skinning carcasses, handling tissues, or consuming tissues from an infected animal. Most human cases result from flea bites.

Public Health Concerns

Plague can infect humans and domestic animals, and infections can be fatal if not detected and treated promptly. To prevent infection, avoid fleas by wearing long clothing and insect repellents, and using flea preventatives for your pets. Do not allow pets to roam freely or consume wildlife carcasses. Do not handle sick or dead wildlife. When hunting, do not skin or consume animals that you find sick or dead. When field dressing carcasses, protect yourself from contact with tissues, fluids, and fleas. Contact your physician immediately if you feel ill with flu like symptoms following contact with wild mammals or fleas.

Additional Information/References

Plague; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: <http://www.cdc.gov/plague/>
 Plague; Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment: <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/plague>

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