

# PLAGUE

## Polk County Preparations

Because of ongoing concerns about potential terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is working to improve overall preparation against terrorism. One aspect of this preparation is to learn more about protecting ourselves against possible attacks with biological agents.

If a public health emergency happens in our community, the Polk County Public Health Department will be the local agency responsible for preparing and guiding medical response and public information efforts. During such an emergency, a critical role of the Public Health Department will be to work with other local first responders, such as fire and police. The Public Health Department will also coordinate response activities with state and federal agencies.

The Polk County Public Health Department is providing this information to help you understand what plague is and what response you may be asked to take in the unlikely event that you were exposed to the agent that causes plague.

## What is Plague?

There are two kinds of plague. Bubonic plague occurs in nature and is primarily a disease of rodents (usually rats, mice, prairie dogs, ground squirrels and chipmunks). It is spread to humans by the bite of infected fleas that feed on the rodents. This form of plague is very rare and cannot be spread from person to person.

Pneumonic plague is the highly contagious form of the disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Pneumonic plague affects the lungs and can cause severe respiratory symptoms. This form of plague can be spread from person-to-person.

## Plague and Bioterrorism

It may be possible for bioterrorists to spread plague through the air as an aerosol or spray. The danger is that people exposed could breathe in the bacteria and develop pneumonic plague, the most serious kind.

If plague were released, it would probably affect a large number of people. The first sign of this kind of biological attack would be sick people going to emergency rooms with plague symptoms.

In the event of a bioterrorist attack with plague, the Public Health Department and emergency officials will provide emergency information and instructions on how to protect yourself and your family. You may be asked to evacuate (leave the area) or shelter-in-place (remain inside a building). In either case, it is important that you and your family have an Emergency Preparation Plan.

## Symptoms of Plague

Bubonic plague - from infected flea bites - can cause swollen and painful lymph glands along with fever, chills and headache. Pneumonic plague - the disease of the lungs with severe respiratory symptoms - can cause chest pain, shortness of breath, cough, rapidly developing pneumonia and fever. Nausea and stomach pain may also occur. If you were exposed to the pneumonic plague, you would begin to experience symptoms within 1 to 6 days after exposure. If left untreated, pneumonic plague can quickly cause death. Pneumonic plague can be spread from person to person.

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### Treatment for Plague

If you have bubonic plague and get treatment in time, almost all the time, it can be cured. With pneumonic plague, it is critical to be diagnosed and treated as soon as possible. The treatment for pneumonic plague is specific antibiotics and supportive medical care to relieve symptoms. The important thing is to get medical care as quickly as possible, preferably within 24 hours of the first symptoms.

National and state public health officials have large supplies of the drugs needed in the event of a plague attack. At the present time, there is no vaccine available in the United States to prevent people from getting plague.

If you have any questions about plague, please contact the **Polk County Health Department at 515-286-3798**. Public Health Department staff members are available to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information about putting together an Emergency Preparation Plan, visit the Department of Homeland Security site at [www.ready.gov](http://www.ready.gov). Also, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at [www.bt.cdc.gov](http://www.bt.cdc.gov) for additional information.

