

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Secretary Catherine Torres, M.D.

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Dept. of Health Confirms Plague Pet Cases from Santa Fe and Rio Arriba Counties

Department Offers Advice to Stay Safe from Plague this Spring

(Santa Fe) –The New Mexico Department of Health’s Scientific Laboratory Division confirmed plague this week in a dog that lives in Santa Fe County, just east of the Santa Fe city limits. Other confirmed animal plague cases include a dog from Santa Fe County just west of the Santa Fe city limits and a cat from Rio Arriba County near Abiquiu.

The cases are the first in New Mexico in 2011. All cases have recovered and no human plague cases have been confirmed.

“Plague cases in pets serve as a warning that there is plague activity in rodents and their fleas and human cases can follow, so I encourage all New Mexicans to follow the prevention recommendations to keep themselves and their families safe,” said Department of Health Cabinet Secretary, Dr. Catherine Torres.

Plague, a bacterial disease of rodents, is generally transmitted to humans through the bites of infected fleas, but can also be transmitted by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, rabbits, and pets.

“We typically see plague activity increasing in the spring,” said Dr. Paul Ettestad, public health veterinarian with the department. “Pets infected with plague are often hunters who have eaten an infected rodent or been bitten by a rodent’s fleas prior to getting ill. Pets can transport the fleas back into the home where they can infect people.”

To prevent plague, the Department of Health recommends:

- Avoid sick or dead rodents and rabbits, and their nests and burrows.
- Keep your pets from roaming and hunting and talk to your veterinarian about using an appropriate flea control product.
- Clean up areas near the house where rodents could live, such as woodpiles, brush piles, junk and abandoned vehicles.
- Sick pets should be examined promptly by a veterinarian.
- See your doctor about any unexplained illness involving a sudden and severe fever.
- Put hay, wood, and compost piles as far as possible from your home.
- Don’t leave your pet’s food and water where mice can get to it.
- Veterinarians and their staff are at higher risk and should take precautions when seeing suspect animal plague cases.

Symptoms of plague in humans include sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, and weakness. In most cases there is a painful swelling of the lymph node in the groin, armpit or neck areas. Plague symptoms in cats and dogs are fever, lethargy and loss of appetite. There may be a swelling in the lymph node under the jaw. With prompt diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment, the fatality rate in people and pets can be greatly reduced.

In New Mexico, there were no human cases in 2010 and six human cases of plague in 2009: three from Santa Fe County, two from Bernalillo County and one from Sandoval County. One of the Santa Fe County cases was a fatal case in an 8-year-old boy.

For more information, including fact sheets in English and Spanish, go to the Department’s website at: <http://www.health.state.nm.us/ERD/HealthData/plague.shtml>.

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