



How to Survive a Plague

Expert
Reviewed

Three Parts: [Preventing the Spread of Plague](#) [Treating the Infected](#) [Identifying Plague Risks](#)

Plague is a potentially fatal disease that is caused by exposure to the bacteria "Yersinia Pestis", which can be contracted from rodents, fleas, undercooked food and even the air we breathe. With modern sanitation and improved living conditions, plague outbreaks are extremely rare, though they still affect some parts of the world. Safeguard yourself and your loved ones against a potential plague epidemic by avoiding contact with pests, practicing strong sanitation and hygiene and seeking immediate medical attention if you think you may have been exposed to the disease.

Part
1

Preventing the Spread of Plague

1 Reduce rodent habitats around the home. Plague is spread through populations of infected rats and the bites of fleas that use them as hosts. Eliminate possible nesting places for rodents in and around your home. Tool sheds, brush piles, basements, garages and attics should all be checked for signs of infestation.^[1]

- Rat droppings are often a sign that rodents are nesting in or passing through your home. If you happen to find rodent excrement, remove it quickly and carefully, as the plague bacteria can survive and be passed on through contact with infected feces.
- Always wear gloves and some type of breathing protection (a medical mask or tied handkerchief) when cleaning rat droppings to prevent contracting the disease yourself.

2 Avoid contact with sick or dead animals. After an animal has died, the Yersinia bacteria can remain active in its tissues or in fleas that it carries. Stay away from animals that have become ill or succumbed to plague symptoms. Plague may spread from diseased tissues or fluids to a living host.^[2]

- Call animal control or sanitation services to dispose of dead animals. Their technicians are equipped with protective gear and can remove potentially infected carcasses with minimal health risk.^[3]

3 Use flea repellent when spending time outside. Wear a repellent spray or rub containing DEET if you plan on spending a lot of time outside. One of the most common means of plague transmission is through the bites of fleas that burrow into the fur of rodents and feed on infected blood. DEET and other repellents will keep fleas away, and keep you safe.^[4]

- People who hike, camp or work outside frequently, or who live in heavily wooded areas, should consider using a flea repellent.
- DEET repellent sprays are safe to use directly on the skin and pose no threat of environmental harm. They work by neutralizing the body's natural scents, making it difficult for biting insects to detect a human target.^[5]

4 Bathe thoroughly and regularly. Wash your hands and face with disinfecting soap and water multiple times throughout the day, and anytime you've been outside or handled animals or animal droppings. Plague bacteria can enter through the delicate tissues of the mouth, nose and eyes. Practice good basic hygiene habits and be aware of risk factors in your environment.^[6]

- As much as possible, try not to touch your face with your hands. The disease spreads easily to sensitive tissues, and you never know when you might have touched something carrying traces of the bacteria.

Part
2

Treating the Infected

1 Acquire medication to stop the disease. In some cases, medication can be prescribed to people whom

pathologists have reason to believe may have been exposed to plague. These drugs bind to and eradicate *Yersinia* bacteria in the bloodstream before it has a chance to multiply. If you believe you or someone you know might be at risk of contracting the disease, talk to a doctor about your options.^[7]

- While there used to be a preventative vaccine offered to defend against plague, it has since been pulled from use. It is uncertain if or when a new vaccine will be formulated.^[8]

2 Seek immediate medical attention. Once an individual has been infected, the only course of action is to treat the disease with powerful antibiotics. Most hospitals keep these antibiotics on hand in case of epidemic emergencies. Do not hesitate to seek medical intervention right away if you've been unfortunate enough to become stricken by the disease.^[9]

- Plague is almost guaranteed to be deadly if left untreated, or not treated quickly enough. Young children, the old and infirm are at the greatest risk.
- Plague infects the blood as it spreads through the bloodstream, attacks lymphatic sites and can eventually lead to toxic shock and necrosis of tissues.

3 Isolate infected parties. For the safety of those around them, people who have caught the plague need to be safely isolated until they receive treatment. Some medical centers are equipped to quarantine infectious disease victims in a highly controlled environment; if getting to a hospital isn't an immediate possibility, place the infected individual in a separate building or room a sufficient distance away from uninfected persons until help arrives.^[10]

- Contact the Center for Disease Control (CDC) without delay if you or someone you know contracts the disease. The CDC has offices all over the United States and can dispatch personnel to collect and treat the infected party.
- Keep a distance of at least 3 feet from anyone who may be infected with an airborne form of the plague.^[11]
- You also might be treated with powerful antibiotics, such as gentamicin, doxycycline ciprofloxacin, and levofloxacin.

Part 3 Identifying Plague Risks

1 Know if your location has had instances of the plague before. Breakouts of the plague are more prevalent in rural areas that are overpopulated. These areas typically tend to have poor sanitation and more rodents. Most frequently, the plague affects areas in Africa.

2 Know if your occupation puts you at risk for the plague. Veterinarians and their assistants, who come in contact with animals on a daily basis, are more likely to contract the plague. People who work outdoors are also more prone to becoming infected.

3 See if your hobbies put you at risk for the plague. Outdoor activities like camping put people more at risk for developing the plague. Be especially cautious if you are in an area you know has been infected by the plague. Take extra precautions not to be bitten by animals or bugs. But also, remember that there are only 5,000 cases of the plague worldwide each year.^[12]

4 Be aware of the symptoms. Plague may not manifest any symptoms for several days. Within a week, the infected will start to exhibit flu-like symptoms, including chills, fever, cold sweats and nausea and vomiting. As the disease progresses, the lymph nodes become swollen and tender as the body attempts to fight off infection. Advanced stages of plague can cause sepsis, or blood toxicity, decomposition of bodily tissues and eventually death.^[13]

- People infected with the plague might also include cough with a watery or bloody sputum, pneumonia, and abdominal pain.
- It is extremely important to stay informed of possible plague outbreaks in your area. If you happen to become sick, you might not know that you have anything worse than a common illness until it's too late.
- As many as 8 cases of plague were reported in major California cities between 1994 and 2006—it is not solely a Third World disease.^[14]

5 Don't let pets sleep in the bed with you. Because *Yersinia Pestis* is most often spread through animal interaction, it is advisable not to allow household pets to sleep in your bed, especially if you live in a wooded area or a region where plague has been identified. Your pet may have had physical contact with another infected animal, or may be host to fleas that can bite and transmit the disease to humans.^[15]

- Pets should be inspected routinely for fleas, ticks and other disease-carrying parasites. It is also recommended that pet owners use medicines and oil repellents to treat household animals for these bugs.^[16]
- Dogs may not exhibit any symptoms of illness but are more likely to shed fleas in the home, whereas cats are very susceptible to various forms of plague and can spread bacteria through saliva droplets spread through coughing and sneezing.

6 Wear protection when working with animals. Make sure to wear gloves and use a disinfectant when cleaning up your pet's feces. Veterinarians, pest control specialists and people of other professions where contact with living and dead animals is common, such as game hunters, should wear hand, eye and breathing protection when handling animals that might carry the disease.^[17]

- Dead animals especially should be handled only by sanitation experts.

7 Get tested for plague if you travel frequently. In impoverished and less developed parts of the world, plague outbreaks occur with unfortunate frequency. Do some research if you're planning a trip to a country where there is a risk of catching the plague and take the necessary medical precautions. If you've returned from such an area within the last few weeks, you should undergo a thorough examination to test for the presence of plague bacteria. All it takes is one unaware person to become Patient Zero in a lethal outbreak.^[18]

- Though there exists no medication for preventing the plague before it is contracted, a doctor can advise you about other ways to protect your health in your travels, as well as areas that you might be better off steering clear of.
- Frequent travelers should undergo a battery of tests to screen for dangerous and communicable diseases before and after all journeys to at-risk areas.^[19]

Tips

- Hire a pest control specialist to eliminate rodents around your home whenever there's a chance of infestation.
- In the event of a plague outbreak scenario, check with your local news and radio stations for safety instructions. Do not leave your home until it has been confirmed that it is safe to be outside.
- Always keep bottled water and packaged food in your home in times of emergency where you are forced to stay indoors.

Warnings

- A plague epidemic can occur in any town, city or country on the planet at any time. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security by thinking that the plague is an obsolete disease, or one that only affects underdeveloped nations.
- Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado are places where plague is the most common in the US. If you live in or have recently traveled to one of these states and experience any of the above symptoms, you should seek medical attention.^[20]

Sources and Citations

1. http://www.cdc.gov/plague/resources/235098_plaguefactsheet_508.pdf
2. <http://www.cdc.gov/plague/transmission/index.html>
3. <http://www.wildlife-removal.com/index.html>

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