

FREMONT COUNTY ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FLEA SAMPLES FROM WILLIAMSBURG NEGATIVE FOR PLAGUE

Fremont County Environmental Health recently investigated a possible die-off in a large prairie dog colony in Williamsburg. Fleas were collected from some of the burrows and submitted to the state laboratory for testing, and the results were negative. However, as a precaution, the administrators of Williamsburg have posted warning signs in the area and provided informational handouts to some of the residents.

The Pueblo City-County Health Department has already confirmed the presence of plague in Pueblo County earlier this year. Fremont County has had human cases and confirmed plague positive animals and fleas in past years, but nothing so far in 2006.

The typical indicator of a possible die-off in a prairie dog colony is a sudden decrease in the number of animals that are normally visible and active in the colony. If you live in an area with a prairie dog colony, and you notice a sudden decrease in the population and activity of a colony, please contact Fremont County Environmental Health at 276-7460.

Plague is a bacterial disease which can pass from infected fleas to animals or people through bites. Rodents (such as mice, rats, squirrels) and cats can carry plague. When an infected rodent becomes sick and dies, the fleas remain alive and the possibility of spread to another warm-blooded mammal, including humans, becomes a greater risk. Human cases of plague are relatively rare, and plague is easily treated with common antibiotics when recognized early, however plague can be severe, life-threatening or fatal.

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms for plague in people may appear 2-6 days after being infected and might include the following:

- Sudden onset of high fever.
- Muscle pain.
- Malaise, or general feeling of being ill.
- Nausea and vomiting.
- An individual may develop a large, swollen, painful lymph node in the area of the fleabite, usually in the groin or armpit.

- Persons with such symptoms should immediately contact their physician.

PRECAUTIONS

- Eliminate rodent harborage, such as piles of lumber, broken cement, trash and weeds, from around your house or cabin.
- Make sure that houses and outbuildings are as rodent-proof as possible.
- Avoid all contact with sick or dead rodents and rabbits.
- While hiking, treat pants, socks, shoe tops, arms and legs with insect repellents.
- Use insect repellent, which will also protect against ticks and mosquitoes.
- Avoid picnicking or camping near rodent burrows.
- Don't walk through fields with obvious colonies.
- Keep pets treated for fleas according to a veterinarian's advice.
- Seek professional veterinary care if your cat exhibits swelling and sores around the mouth, head and neck, and use gloves and face protection if you have to handle a suspiciously sick pet.
- Don't feed or entice any rodent or rabbit species into your yard, back porch or patio.
- Don't linger in rodent-infested areas when camping or hiking, and don't catch, play with or attempt to hand feed wild rodents.
- Don't let dogs and cats wander freely in rodent inhabited areas, keep pets indoors or on a leash while outdoors.
- If you hunt or trap rabbits or carnivorous wild animals, such as coyotes and bobcats, protect your hands and face while skinning or handling these animals. Fresh pelts may be treated with flea spray or powder.
- Don't attempt to kill prairie dogs unless you are prepared to control fleas at the same time.

Household pets seem to be playing an increasingly larger role in the transmission of plague to humans. Typically, these household pets are allowed to roam and may encounter plague away from the house. Dogs are fairly resistant to plague and develop few, if any, symptoms. If they do become sick, they may experience a few days of fever, lethargy, and may lose their appetite, and then recover. But dogs are very good at transporting infected fleas back home where the fleas might get off the dog and bite you.

Cats may also transport fleas back home, are very susceptible to plague, and upon exposure, may become very sick or die. Cats can also be infected by eating infected rodents. During the period that a cat is sick with plague, it may be easily transmitted to a human. Cats have been known to develop pneumonic plague and transmit the disease by exhaling infected droplets.

Bites from wild carnivores and from cats and dogs have caused human plague. Such animals may be infected, carry the bacteria in their mouths or may transport infective fleas.

If you have any questions regarding plague, contact Fremont County Environmental Health at 276-7460.

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If possible, please notify me at sdard@fremontco.com or 276-7361, when this release is scheduled for publication or the date of publication. Thank you.