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June 26, 2018

Elmore County cat recovering from plague infection

Laboratory tests indicate an Elmore County cat was infected with plague. The cat had recent contact with a rodent, which may have been a ground squirrel, or "whistle pig," before becoming ill. The cat was treated promptly by a veterinarian and is recovering. No additional pets or people are ill.

While Idaho wildlife officials have not detected any ground squirrel die-offs in the state so far this year, the infected cat lives within an area of southern Idaho identified in previous years as a plague-affected area. This is a reminder that plague circulates in fleas, which can affect ground squirrels, voles, and mice, every year in Idaho.

"It is important to take precautions to avoid contact with ground squirrels and their fleas," said Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Idaho State Public Health veterinarian. "Make sure your pets have proper flea control and keep them away from ground squirrel habitat, if possible."

Plague is transmitted through the bite of infected fleas and can cause serious illness in people and pets if not treated promptly. It also can be transmitted to people by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, rabbits, and pets. Common rodents that can become infected include ground squirrels, rats, voles, and mice. Tree squirrels in Idaho are not known to carry plague.

People can greatly reduce their risk of becoming infected with plague by taking simple precautions, including avoiding contact with wild rodents, their fleas, and rodent carcasses.

Health officials recommend the following:

- Do not feed rodents in picnic or campground areas and never handle sick or dead rodents.
- Keep your pets from roaming and hunting ground squirrels or other rodents in affected desert areas.
- Talk to your veterinarian about using the appropriate flea control product on pets to protect them and reduce the chance that they bring fleas into the home. Note: not all products are safe for cats and dogs so read the labels carefully.
- Reduce rodent habitat. Clean up areas near your home where rodents can live, such as woodpiles. Put hay, wood, and compost piles as far as possible from your home.
- Have your sick pets examined promptly by a veterinarian, especially if they may have had contact with sick or dead rodents in the desert areas south and east of Boise and Mountain Home. Plague can cause serious illness in pets, particularly in cats.

- See your doctor if you have any unexplained illness involving a sudden and severe fever after being in a plague-impacted area.
- Don't leave pet food and water where rodents or other wild animals can access them.

Symptoms of Plague

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. Plague symptoms in cats and dogs include 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 chance of recovery is greatly increased. Physicians and veterinarians who suspect plague should promptly report it to their local public health district, day or night.

Background

In late May 2018, an Elmore County child was diagnosed with plague — the first human case in Idaho since 1992. The child was treated at a hospital and is recovering at home. It remains unknown whether the child was exposed to plague in Idaho or during a recent trip to Oregon.

In 2015 and 2016, plague was identified in ground squirrels. During this time, ground squirrel die-offs were reported in the desert south of the Boise Airport and around Mountain Home. In 2015, one dog tested presumptive-positive. In 2016, six cats tested positive, most from the greater Mountain Home area.

Plague activity can increase in the spring and summer months when rodents are more active. Wildlife experts say ground squirrels become dormant in late June to early July, and the threat of plague will decrease.

For more information on plague (including a searchable map), or to report a rodent die-off of five or more animals, visit <https://idfg.idaho.gov/plague>.

Additional resources can be found here:

- General overview: www.cdc.gov/plague/
- [FAQs about plague and plague in Idaho](#)
- [Protect Yourself From Plague](#) fact sheet

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