



# PLAGUE

1. **Agent:** *Yersinia pestis*, a Gram-negative bacillus.

2. **Identification:**

a. **Symptoms:**

**Bubonic plague:** Presents as acute lymphadenitis in lymph nodes that drain the site of a fleabite. Occur more often in inguinal nodes, less commonly in axillary and cervical nodes. Involved nodes become swollen and tender, and may suppurate. Fever is usually present.

**Septicemic plague:** All forms of plague, including those without lymphadenopathy, may progress to septicemic plague with dissemination by the bloodstream to diverse parts of the body.

**Pneumonic plague:** Often occurs secondarily to hematogenous dissemination of bubonic plague, resulting in pneumonia with mediastinitis or pleural effusion. Inhalation of respiratory droplets or artificially generated aerosols (bioterrorism) can cause primary plague pneumonia, a highly communicable disease that may lead to localized outbreaks. Pneumonia Plague is thought to be the most likely presentation in the event of a biological attack.

Untreated bubonic plague has a fatality rate of 50%. Pneumonic and septicemic plagues are invariably fatal if not treated.

b. **Differential Diagnosis:**

**Bubonic:** Tularemia, granuloma inguinale, staphylococcal or streptococcal lymphadenitis, cat-scratch fever, incarcerated hernia, acute appendicitis, tuberculosis adenitis.

**Septicemic:** enteric fever, meningococemia.

**Pneumonic and meningitis:** other bacterial causes of pneumonia and meningitis.

c. **Diagnosis:** Confirmed by culture of *Y. pestis* from bubo aspirate, blood, CSF or sputum, or a fourfold or greater change in serum antibody between acute and convalescent specimens. Presumptive diagnosis made by positive EIA (enzyme linked immunosorbent assay), fluorescent antibody test or visualization of bipolar staining dumbbell-shaped organisms on smear of bubo aspirate, blood, spinal fluid or sputum.

3. **Incubation:** 1-7 days for bubonic plague; primary plague pneumonia in 1-6 days.

4. **Reservoir:** Wild rodents, e.g., ground squirrels. Lagomorphs (rabbits and hares) and domestic cats can serve as a source of infection to people.

5. **Source:** Infected fleas and blood or tissue from an animal infected with *Y. pestis*; respiratory droplets and sputum from patients or animals with pneumonic plague. Intentional release as an agent of bioterrorism.

6. **Transmission:**

**Bubonic:** Bite from an infected flea, or by handling tissues of an infected animal.

**Pneumonic:** Contact with droplets or sputum from an infected patient or animal, Intentional release by terrorist(s).

7. **Communicability:** Human to human only in pneumonic form. Fleas may remain infective for months.

8. **Specific Treatment:** Tetracyclines or sulfonamides. For detailed treatment for pregnant women and children see [Terrorism Agent Information and Treatment Guidelines for Hospitals & Clinicians](#).

9. **Immunity:** Temporary.

## REPORTING PROCEDURES

1. **Reportable.** *California Code of Regulations*, Title 17, Sections 2500, 2696. All suspect cases should be reported **immediately by**



**phone** to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LAC DPH) Acute Communicable Disease Control (ACDC) Program at: During business hours (M-F 8:00 AM-5:00 PM) (213) 240-7941. After hours report to County operator (213) 974-1234 and ask to speak with the Public Health Physician on Call.

Laboratory work with clinical specimens must be done under Bio-safety level (BSL)-2-condition. Call ACDC to arrange for submission of specimen for confirmations testing.

ACDC must notify the State Division of Communicable Disease Control immediately upon receiving notice of a case of suspected plague.

ACDC will supervise investigation and control measures.

2. **Report Form:** [PLAGUE \(HUMAN\) CASE INVESTIGATION REPORT \(CDPH 8549\)](#).

3. **Epidemiologic Data:**

- a. History of travel to or residing in endemic areas within the incubation period.
- b. Detailed information regarding method of travel (i.e., hiking, mule ride, camping, etc.) and itinerary.
- c. History of flea bites.
- d. Contact with sick or dead animals, (e.g., domestic cats, ground squirrels, rabbits). Location of hunting or trapping.
- e. Occupation and exact address of workplace.

4. **Bioterrorism:** *Yersinia pestis* has been listed by the CDC as one of the agents most likely to be used in a bioterrorist attack because of its devastating physical and psychological effects and its ability to be weaponized and effectively delivered to a target area.

**CONTROL OF CASE, CONTACTS & CARRIERS**

Immediate investigation required. ACDC will supervise investigation and control measures.

**CASE OF BUBONIC PLAGUE:**

1. Contact and standard precautions.
2. Use an effective insecticide to eliminate all fleas from the patient, clothing, and living quarters.

**CASE OF PNEUMONIC PLAGUE:**

1. Droplet precautions and standard precautions.
2. **Isolation:** Patients should be placed in a private room; persons entering should wear gown gloves and mask. Negative air pressure isolation rooms are not indicated.
3. Immediate hospitalization required; arrangements to be made by the ACDC duty officer.
4. Eliminate all fleas with an effective insecticide from the patient, clothing, and living quarters.
5. If case dies, refer to **Part III, MORTICIANS & CEMETERIES**. See also [Terrorism Agent Information and Treatment Guidelines for Hospitals & Clinicians](#).

**CONTACTS:** Persons exposed to the aerosolized *Yersinia pestis* or have been in close physical contact with a case or animal that has or is suspected of having plague.

1. Institute immediate, complete quarantine of household and contacts (including domestic animals) until disinfections and 6 days of surveillance completed. Consult with the ACDC duty officer.
2. Close contacts should receive chemoprophylaxis with either tetracyclines or sulfonamides. All prophylactic antibiotic therapy should continue for 7 days from last exposure to the case.

**CARRIERS:** None applicable.

**PREVENTION-EDUCATION**

1. Control and monitor rodent and flea populations for evidence of infection.
2. When camping in or near endemic areas, use insect repellents, sleep off the ground, and protect pets from fleas. Consult with forest ranger for identification of endemic areas. Do



not handle sick or dead animals but report them to park officials.

3. Seek immediate medical evaluation for suspected cases that have a history of visits into wilderness areas of California within 6 days of the onset of symptoms.
4. Disinfect articles contaminated with blood, sputum or purulent discharges from suspected case.
5. Review [Terrorism Agent Information and Treatment Guidelines for Hospitals & Clinicians](#).

### DIAGNOSTIC PROCEDURES

1. Diagnosis is confirmed by isolating *Y. pestis* by culture in fluid from buboes, blood, spinal fluid, or sputum.
2. Direct visualization of stained smear is presumptive diagnosis.
3. A serologic test for plague is also available. Diagnosis is based on a fourfold rise in titer between acute and convalescent sera. Consult with Public Health Laboratory.