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WHAT IS PLAGUE?

Three forms of plague are caused by the bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*: bubonic plague, pneumonic plague, and septicemic plague.

Bubonic plague is passed from fleas to humans and animals. Bubonic plague affects the lymph nodes of an infected person.

Pneumonic plague, which affects the lungs, is the most serious form of plague. Pneumonic plague is caused by inhalation of the bacteria that may be placed into the air by aerosol release during a bioterrorism attack. Pneumonic plague can also be transmitted from person-to-person. This transmission occurs when particles enter the air after an infected person coughs or sneezes. People who travel may spread the disease due to the delay between the exposure to the bacteria and the onset of symptoms. During this period of delay, these people are contagious and can infect others.

Septicemic plague, which affects the blood system, is caused by the bite of fleas. Septicemic plague also occurs as a result of either bubonic plague or pneumonic plague.

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SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of bubonic plague include fever, chills, and pain in the area of the lymph nodes. Lymph nodes eventually enlarge and become bruised. A person with pneumonic plague will begin having symptoms of the disease about one to three days after exposure to the bacteria. Symptoms of pneumonic plague include fever, chills, cough, shortness of breath, chest pain, and coughing up blood. Muscle aches, weakness, and dizziness may also occur. Lung problems usually begin on the second day. The symptoms of septicemic plague include fever, chills, exhaustion, abdominal pain, shock, and internal bleeding.

TREATMENT

Antibiotics should be given within 24 hours after the first symptoms begin in order to prevent death. There are several types of medications that are available to treat pneumonic plague. These include both oral medications (tetracycline or fluoroquinolone) and medications that can be injected (streptomycin or gentamicin).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How can I prevent myself from getting plague?**
There is not a vaccine available in the United States for plague, but research is currently underway.
- **Is there any equipment I need to wear that will prevent accidental exposure to pneumonic plague?**
No, special equipment does not need to be purchased. Regular masks will be provided while a patient is in the hospital, as needed.
- **Can I die from plague?**
Plague is curable. Most patients usually recover from plague. If treatment is not provided within 24 hours after symptoms begin, there is a higher possibility for death to occur.
- **Why are we concerned about pneumonic plague as a bioweapon?**
With highly advanced knowledge and technology, *Yersinia pestis*, can be isolated and grown in a laboratory by terrorists. Plague is treatable though, if medical care begins early.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:

Department of State Health Services
<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
<http://www.cdc.gov>