

News release

June 9, 2011

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Oregon Public Health veterinarian confirms a cat has tested positive for bubonic plague

Plague cases are rare in Oregon; flea treatment for household pets can help prevent plague

One cat in Prineville, Oregon, has tested positive for plague. The cat is recovering. Oregon Public Health Division, Oregon State University Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have confirmed that that the cat tested positive for plague.

"Plague is spread to humans through a bite from an infected flea. People can protect themselves, their family members and their pets," said Emilio DeBess, D.V.M., M.P.V.M., Oregon Public Health Division veterinarian. "Using flea treatment on your pets is very important, because your pets can bring fleas into your home. Plague is serious but it is treatable with antibiotics if caught early."

Plague is rare in Oregon. Only three human cases have been diagnosed since 1995 and they all recovered. Plague is spread to humans through a bite from an infected flea. Symptoms typically develop within one to four days after exposure and include fever, chills, headache, weakness and a bloody or watery cough due to infection of the lungs (pneumonia), enlarged, tender lymph nodes, abdominal pain and bleeding into the skin or other organs. People should contact their health care provider if plague is suspected and a veterinarian if pets or other animals exhibit symptoms consistent with the plague.

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Early treatment for pets and people with appropriate antibiotics is essential to curing plague infections. Untreated plague can be fatal for animals and people. Antibiotics to prevent or treat plague should be used only under the direction of a health care provider.

Plague can be passed from fleas feeding on infected wild mammals to pets such as cats and to their human owners. Last year two human cases of plague were diagnosed in Lake County. Further investigation found that the family dog had also been exposed to plague. All survived.

“To protect your pets, avoid flea exposure by being around areas with fleas or other pets carrying fleas, and treat your pets for fleas to help prevent this disease,” DeBess said. “Call your local veterinarians for assistance in what products are safe for use in pets, because some treatments may be toxic to your pet.”

Some additional steps to prevent flea bites are to wear insect repellent, tuck pant cuffs into socks when in areas heavily occupied by rodents, and avoid contact with wildlife including rodents. Pet owners are encouraged to keep cats indoors.

Colin Gillin, D.V.M., Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, reminds people that if they observe sick or dead wildlife to contact the ODFW veterinarians at 1-866-968-2600.

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About the Oregon Health Authority

OHA is the organization at the forefront of lowering and containing costs, improving quality, and increasing access to health care in order to improve the lifelong health of Oregonians. OHA is overseen by the nine-member citizen Oregon Health Policy Board working toward comprehensive health and health care reform in our state.