From: Ross Doman
To: Doman, Ross
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Subject: PRESS RELEASE FROM THE WYOMING DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH (second today)

July 8, 2005

*** NOTE TO EDITORS ***
Laramie County health officials will conduct another round of surveillance this afternoon at approximately 2 pm. in the vicinity of the Gilchrist School on Happy Jack Road. Members of the press who wish to join them are encouraged to phone City/County Health at (307) 633-4097 for more information.

*** FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ***

Laramie County health officials report third cat with plague discovered west of Cheyenne; Fourth cat plague case in state this year

CHEYENNE - Laramie County health officials said today that a third plague case was discovered in a cat just west of Cheyenne. This is the second case in a week's time in Laramie County. A fourth cat with plague was found in Albany County earlier this year. Prior to these cases, Wyoming had not recorded a cat with plague since 1982.

"This discovery reemphasizes that something unique is occurring in Laramie County," said Gus Lopez, the City/County Health Director in Cheyenne. "I strongly suggest that people take precautions to protect themselves and their pets from exposure to the plague."

Ways to avoid the plague include:

- Avoiding unnecessary contact with rodents and their nests and burrows.
- Avoiding unnecessary contact with sick or dead animals, especially rodents and rabbits, and wearing protective gloves when handling sick or dead animals.
- Having ill pets, such as cats and dogs, examined by a veterinarian.
- Avoiding areas where a large number of unexplained rodent deaths have been observed.
- Keeping pets away from rodent nests and burrows by keeping them leashed.
- Treating pets with flea preventatives (see your local veterinarian for more information).

Dr. Jamie Snow, the State Public Health Veterinarian with the Wyoming Department of Health, said people should monitor their pets in the summer months to control contact with rodents and apply flea preventatives. They should also contact their veterinarians at any sign of illness. She also urged veterinarians and vet staffers to be aware of risks of plague to themselves. This includes instructions to:

- Wear gloves when dealing with all suspect cases of plague.
- Isolate animal.
- Minimize the number of personnel dealing with the animal.
- Properly disinfect all areas/equipment that may come in contact with the animal with a ten percent bleach solution.
- Wear a mask if the animal is showing respiratory signs to minimize droplet exposure.
- Confirm a suspect diagnosis by sending samples to the State Veterinary Lab.
- If an animal is confirmed to have plage, contact your health care provider to alert them that you were exposed to an animal infected with plague. They may consider putting you on an antibiotic.

Lopez said that, much the same as a week ago, the City/County Mobile Response Unit would be traveling to Gilchrist School out on Happy Jack Road this afternoon to set up a surveillance station. This cat, like the one last week, lived in that area so they would be doing active surveillance and education throughout the day.

He said that the team will be driving the roads looking for presence of living or dead ground squirrels and prairie dogs. If they find burrows with no activity, that is an indication of either very active carnivores in the area - including coyotes, foxes, and cats - or fleas carrying plague which kill off the rodents.

Burrows with no activity will be "swabbed for fleas" he said, using a piece of white flannel on a long wire poked into the holes. The fleas cling to the flannel and are then collected and sent down to the CDC in Fort Collins, Colo. for plague testing. Lopez said the team may also dust the holes to kill any fleas inside.

They will also be passing out flyers and door hangers for homes in the area covering ways to avoid the plague and hantavirus.

Wyoming Department of Health Director and State Health Officer, Dr. Brent Sherard, said that while the risk for humans to contract plague is relatively low in Wyoming, the disease has been documented in animals in 19 of Wyoming's 23 counties since records were kept. A human case in Goshen County last fall marked the fifth since the late 1970s. The other recorded cases involving Wyoming residents include a 1978 case in Washakie County, a 1982 case in Laramie County, a 1992 case in Sheridan County, and a case in 2000 in Washakie County. The Sheridan County case in 1992 resulted in death. Nationally, about one case per year is recorded of human plague due to contact with infected cats, Sherard said. Some of these cases have been fatal.

Sherard said that the typical sign of the most common form of human plague is a swollen and very tender lymph gland (usually in the groin), accompanied by pain. The swollen gland is called a "bubo" (hence the term "bubonic plague"). Bubonic plague should be suspected when a person develops a swollen gland, fever, chills, headache, and extreme exhaustion and has a history of possible exposure to infected rodents, rabbits, or fleas. He advised that anyone experiencing these symptoms see their healthcare provider.

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Plague Fact Sheet

Q. How is plague transmitted?
A. Plague, caused by a bacterium called Yersinia pestis, is transmitted from rodent to rodent by infected fleas.

Q. How do people get plague?
A. Plague is characterized by periodic disease outbreaks in rodent populations, some of which have a high death rate. During these outbreaks, hungry infected fleas that have lost their normal hosts seek other sources of blood, thus increasing the increased risk to humans and other animals frequenting the area. Rock squirrels and their fleas are the most frequent sources of human infection in the southwestern statesman other rodent species, such as prairie dogs, wood rats, chipmunks, and other ground squirrels and their fleas suffer plague outbreaks and some of these occasionally serve as sources of human infection. Deer mice and voles are thought to maintain the disease in animal populations but are less important as sources of human infection. Other less frequent sources of infection include wild rabbits, and wild carnivores that pick up their infections from wild rodent outbreaks. Domestic cats (and sometimes dogs) are readily infected by fleas or from eating infected wild rodents. Cats may serve as a source of infection to persons exposed to them. Pets may also bring plague-infected fleas into the home.

Q. What is the basic transmission cycle?
A. Fleas become infected by feeding on rodents, such as the chipmunks, prairie dogs, ground squirrels, mice, and other mammals that are infected with the bacteria Yersinia pestis. Fleas transmit the plague bacteria to humans and other mammals during the feeding process. The plague bacteria are maintained in the blood systems of rodents.

Q. Could you get plague from another person?

A. Yes, when the other person has plague pneumonia and coughs droplets containing the plague bacteria into air that is breathed by a non-infected person.

Q. What are the signs and symptoms of plague?
A. The typical sign of the most common form of human plague is a swollen and very tender lymph gland, accompanied by pain. The swollen gland is called a "bubo" (hence the term "bubonic plague"). Bubonic plague should be suspected when a person develops a swollen gland, fever, chills, headache, and extreme exhaustion, and has a history of possible exposure to infected rodents, rabbits, or fleas.

Q. What is the incubation period for plague?
A. A person usually becomes ill with bubonic plague 2 to 6 days after being infected. When bubonic plague is left untreated, plague bacteria invade the bloodstream. When plague bacteria multiply in the bloodstream, they spread rapidly throughout the body and cause a severe and often fatal condition. Infection of the lungs with the plague bacterium causes the pneumonic form of plague, a severe respiratory illness. The infected person may experience high fever, chills, cough, and breathing difficulty, and expel bloody sputum. If plague patients are not given specific antibiotic therapy, the disease can progress rapidly to death.

Q. What is the mortality rate of plague?
A. About 14% (1 in 7) of all plague cases in the United States are fatal.

Q. How many cases of plague occur in the U.S.?
A. Human plague in the United States has occurred as mostly scattered cases in rural areas (an average of 10 to 20 persons each year). Globally, the World Health Organization reports 1,000 to 3,000 cases of plague every year.

Q. Is the disease seasonal in its occurrence?
A. No, plague can be acquired at anytime during the year.

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Plague Prevention and Control

Risk reduction: Attempts to eliminate fleas and wild rodents from the natural environment in plague-infected areas are impractical. However, controlling rodents and their fleas around places where people live, work, and play is very important in preventing human disease. Therefore, preventive measures are directed to home, work, and recreational settings where the risk of acquiring plague is high.

A combined approach using the following methods is recommended:
1. Environmental sanitation
2. Educating the public on ways to prevent plague exposures
3. Preventive antibiotic therapy

Environmental Sanitation: Effective environmental sanitation reduces the risk of persons being bitten by infectious fleas of rodents and other animals in places where people live, work, and recreate. It is important to remove food sources used by rodents and make homes, buildings, warehouses, or feed sheds rodent-proof. Applying chemicals that kill fleas and rodents is effective but should usually be done by trained professionals. Rats that inhabit ships and docks should also be controlled by trained professionals who can inspect and, if necessary, fumigate cargoes.

Public Health Education: In the western United States, where plague is widespread in wild rodents, people living, working, or playing where the infection is active face the greatest threat. Educating the general public and the medical community about how to avoid exposure to disease-bearing animals and their fleas is very important and should include the following preventive recommendations:
- Watch for plague activity in rodent populations where plague is known to occur. Report any observations of unusually large numbers of sick or dead animals to the local health department or law

enforcement officials.
- Eliminate sources of food and nesting places for rodents around homes, work places, and recreation areas; remove brush, rock piles, junk, cluttered firewood, and potential-food supplies, such as pet and wild animal food. Make your home rodent-proof.
- If you anticipate being exposed to rodent fleas, apply insect repellents to clothing and skin, according to label instructions, to prevent flea bites. Wear gloves when handling potentially infected animals.
- If you live in areas where rodent plague occurs, treat pet dogs and cats for flea control regularly and not allow these animals to roam freely.
- Health authorities may use appropriate chemicals to kill fleas at selected sites during animal plague outbreaks.

Vaccines: Plague vaccine is no longer available in the United States.

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A Note for Special Human Populations at Risk for Plague, such as Veterinarians and Veterinarian Staff Members

Infection Control Guidelines: Protect yourself, your staff, and other animals.
- Wear gloves when dealing with all suspect cases of plague.
- Isolate animal.
- Minimize the number of personnel dealing with the animal.
- Properly disinfect all areas/equipment that may come in contact with the animal with a ten percent bleach solution.
- Wear a mas if the animal is showing respiratory signs to minimize droplet exposure.
- Confirm a suspect diagnosis by sending samples to the State Veterinary Lab.
- If an animal is confirmed to have plage, contact your health care provider to alert them that you were exposed to an animal infected with plague. They may consider putting you on an antibiotic.

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For more information, please contact:
Gus Lopez, Director, City/County Health Department (in Cheyenne), (307) 633-4097
Ross Doman, Public Information Officer, Wyoming Department of Health, (307) 631-0699