

## FACT SHEET

### Pneumonic Plague

#### What is it?

Plague is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. This bacterium is found in rodents and their fleas and occurs in many areas of the world, including the United States.

*Y. pestis* is easily destroyed by sunlight and drying. Even so, when released into air, the bacterium will survive for up to one hour, although this could vary depending on conditions.

Pneumonic plague is one of several forms of plague. Pneumonic plague occurs when *Y. pestis* infects the lungs. This type of plague can spread from person to person through the air. Transmission can take place if someone breathes in aerosolized bacteria, which could happen in a bioterrorist attack. Pneumonic plague is also spread by breathing in *Y. pestis* suspended in respiratory droplets from a person (or animal) with pneumonic plague. Becoming infected in this way usually requires direct and close contact with the ill person or animal. Pneumonic plague may also occur if a person with bubonic or septicemic plague is untreated and the bacteria spread to the lungs.

#### Symptoms

With pneumonic plague, the first signs of illness are fever, headache, weakness, and rapidly developing pneumonia with shortness of breath, chest pain, cough, and sometimes bloody or watery sputum. The pneumonia progresses for 2 to 4 days and may cause respiratory failure and shock. Without early treatment, patients may die.

#### Treatment

Early treatment of pneumonic plague is essential. To reduce the chance of death, antibiotics must be given within 24 hours of first symptoms. Streptomycin, gentamicin, the tetracyclines, and chloramphenicol are all effective against pneumonic plague. Antibiotic treatment for 7 days will protect people who have had direct, close contact with infected patients. Wearing a close-fitting surgical mask also protects against infection.

A plague vaccine is not currently available for use in the United States.

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