

NEW MEXICO DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD

For immediate release:
June 4, 2009

Media contact: Deborah Busemeyer
505-827-2619, 470-2290

State Confirms Two Human Plague Cases from Santa Fe County First Human Plague Cases, Fatality in New Mexico So Far This Year

(Santa Fe) -- The New Mexico Department of Health confirmed today two cases of bubonic plague in siblings from Santa Fe County. An 8-year-boy has died, and his 10-year-old sister is hospitalized and recovering. These cases are the first human plague cases in New Mexico and the first cases of plague in the nation so far this year. The Department of Health is conducting an environmental investigation at the family's residence to determine if there is any ongoing risk to people.

"Our sympathies go out to this young boy's family and friends," said Health Secretary Alfredo Vigil, MD. "Unfortunately plague can be difficult to detect and can quickly escalate in severity."

Most people become ill two to seven days after being infected with the plague bacteria, but it could be as short as a few hours for pneumonic plague. There are three forms of plague: bubonic plague which infects lymph nodes, septicemic plague which is an infection of the blood, and pneumonic plague which is an infection of the lungs.

Symptoms of bubonic plague in humans include fever, painful swollen lymph nodes in the groin, armpit or neck areas, chills, and sometimes headache, vomiting, and diarrhea. Septicemic plague can also present with high fever, abdominal pain, and diarrhea. Pneumonic plague can include severe cough, difficulty breathing and bloody sputum. With prompt diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment, the fatality rate in people and pets can be greatly reduced.

"June, July and August are the months when we typically see the highest number of human cases of plague in New Mexico," said Dr. Paul Ettestad, the Department's public health veterinarian. "Everyone should take precautions to prevent their exposure to rodents as part of their regular routine no matter where they live. Pets should be treated with a flea control product and not be allowed to roam and hunt. They can bring fleas from infected rodents back into the home where they can bite people, especially if they are allowed to sleep in bed with people."

Plague, a bacterial disease of rodents, is generally transmitted to humans through the bites of infected fleas, but can also be transmitted by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, wildlife and pets.

To prevent cases of plague, the Department of Health recommends:

- Avoid sick or dead rodents.

- Teach children not to play near rodent nests or burrows.
- Treat pets regularly with an effective flea control product.
- Clean up areas near the house where rodents could live.
- Keep pets from roaming and hunting.
- Sick pets should be examined promptly by a veterinarian.

Symptoms in cats are similar to humans. Fever, lethargy, not eating, and swollen lymph nodes (usually in the neck area) are the most common signs.

There was one human case of plague in 2008 in an Eddy County man. There were five human cases of plague in Bernalillo, San Juan, Santa Fe and Torrance counties in 2007 with one fatality. Eight human plague cases occurred in New Mexico in 2006 with three fatalities.

###