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Department of Health Confirms Fourth Human Plague Case in State 50-year-old Woman from Santa Fe County Recovered

(Santa Fe) – The New Mexico Department of Health has confirmed a case of septicemic plague in a 50-year-old woman from Santa Fe County. The patient was hospitalized but has recovered. This is the fourth case of plague confirmed in New Mexico this year.

The first case occurred in late April in a man from San Juan County who recovered, the second case in a woman from Torrance County who is still hospitalized, and the third case in a young boy from Bernalillo County who died.

“Whenever there is a human case of plague, our top priority is ensuring the safety of the immediate family, neighbors, and health care providers,” said C. Mack Sewell, the Department of Health’s state epidemiologist. “We do that by conducting an environmental investigation, assessing whether others are at risk and providing antibiotics, when necessary, to anyone who was exposed, alerting physicians that plague is in the area, and providing information to neighbors in a door-to-door educational campaign.”

Dr. Paul Ettestad, the Department’s public health veterinarian, said human cases this year have been associated with people receiving flea bites, and that could be caused by pets that roam and hunt and bring rodents or their fleas back into the home.

“There are ways to protect you and your pets from plague: prevent your pets from roaming and hunting rodents, use a flea control product on all your pets, and don’t allow them to sleep in bed with you,” Ettestad said.

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. Septicemic plague occurs when the bacteria multiply in the blood.

Most people become ill two to seven days after being infected with the plague bacteria. 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.

Symptoms in cats are similar. Fever, lethargy, not eating, and swollen lymph nodes (usually in the neck area) are the most common signs. With prompt diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment, the fatality rate in people and pets can be greatly reduced.

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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.

There were eight human cases of plague in 2006 in New Mexico with two fatalities. Five cases were from Bernalillo County and one each from Santa Fe, San Miguel, and Tarrant counties. Four human plague cases occurred in New Mexico in 2005. There were no human plague cases in New Mexico in 2004.

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