



Healthy People in Healthy Communities

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE
707 NORTH ARMSTRONG PLACE
BOISE, ID 83704-0825
TEL. (208) 327-8639
FAX (208) 327-8595
cdhd.idaho.gov

NEWS

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Contact: Christine Myron, Public Information Officer
Desk: (208) 327-8639 | Cell: (208) 871-1712

Elmore County cat likely died of plague infection

Elmore County — Laboratory tests indicate an Elmore County cat likely died from plague infection. The cat was feral, but recently had been cared for by an Elmore County family as an outdoor cat. The cat had known contact with ground squirrels, also known as “whistle pigs,” before passing. Family members are being treated with antibiotics as a precaution.

Plague activity can increase in the spring and summer months when rodents are more active. In May, an Elmore County child became infected with plague, and in June, an Elmore County pet cat became infected. Both the child and pet cat received prompt medical treatment and made full recoveries. It is most likely the child contracted plague in Oregon but an exact source was not found.

While Idaho wildlife officials have not detected any ground squirrel die-offs in Idaho so far this year, all three plague cases live within an area of southern Idaho identified as a plague-affected area. This is a reminder that plague circulates in fleas, which can affect ground squirrels, voles, and mice, every year in Idaho.

“In addition to protecting their own pets with flea control, people should avoid contact with feral animals due to the risk of diseases like plague, said Sarah Correll, Epidemiologist with Central District Health Department.” People can be exposed to plague when pets bring infected fleas back into the home, by caring for a sick pet or feral animal without proper precautions, or by contact with rodents carrying fleas,” said Correll.

Plague is transmitted through the bite of infected fleas and can cause serious illness in people and pets if not treated promptly. It also can be transmitted to people by direct contact with infected animals, including rodents, rabbits, and pets. Common rodents that can become infected include ground squirrels, rats, voles, and mice. Tree squirrels in Idaho are not known to carry plague.

People can greatly reduce their risk of becoming infected with plague by taking simple precautions, including avoiding contact with feral animals, wild rodents, their fleas, and rodent carcasses.

Health officials recommend the following:

- Do not feed rodents in picnic or campground areas and never handle sick or dead rodents.
- Keep your pets from roaming and hunting ground squirrels or other rodents in affected desert areas.
- Talk to your veterinarian about using the appropriate flea control product on pets to protect them and reduce the chance that they bring fleas into the home. Note: not all products are safe for cats and dogs so read the labels carefully.
- Reduce rodent habitat. Clean up areas near your home where rodents can live, such as woodpiles. Put hay, wood, and compost piles as far as possible from your home.
- Have your sick pets examined promptly by a veterinarian, especially if they may have had contact with sick or dead rodents in the desert areas south and east of Boise and Mountain Home. Plague can cause serious illness in pets, particularly in cats.
- See your doctor if you have any unexplained illness involving a sudden and severe fever after being in a plague-impacted area.
- Don't leave pet food and water where rodents or other wild animals can access them.

Additionally, if you enter an area where plague has been identified, wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants, use DEET on clothing and exposed skin in accordance with label instructions or wear clothing pre-treated with permethrin.

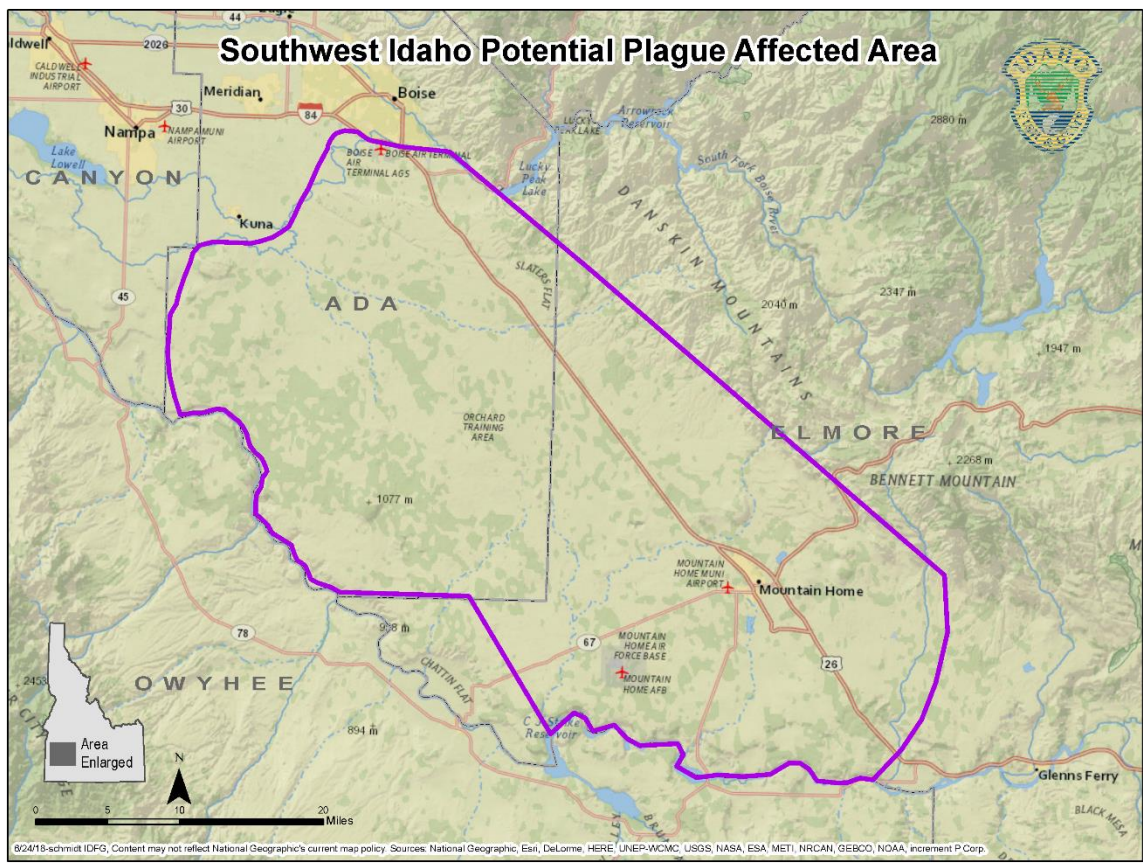
Symptoms of Plague

Symptoms of plague in humans include sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, and weakness. In most cases there is a painful swelling of the lymph node in the groin, armpit, or neck. Plague symptoms in cats and dogs include fever, lethargy, and loss of appetite. There may be a swelling in the lymph node under the jaw. With prompt diagnosis and appropriate antibiotic treatment, the chance of recovery is greatly increased. Physicians and veterinarians who suspect plague should promptly report it to their local public health district, day or night.

Wildlife experts say ground squirrels typically become dormant in late June to early July. For more information on plague (including a searchable map), or to report a rodent die-off of five or more animals, visit <https://idfg.idaho.gov/plague>.

Additional resources can be found here:

- General overview: www.cdc.gov/plague/
- [FAQs about plague and plague in Idaho](#)
- [Protect Yourself From Plague](#) fact sheet



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