

PLAGUE INFORMATION

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared an outbreak of plague in Madagascar, October 2017.



What is plague?

Plague is a bacterial disease which is found mainly in rodents, and is usually spread by fleas from rodents to other animals and humans. Human-to-human transmission sometimes occurs, leading to outbreaks such as the current one in Madagascar.

- Bubonic plague – an infection of the lymph glands, can progress to septicaemic or pneumonic forms
- Septicaemic plague – infection of the blood
- Pneumonic plague – infection of the lungs that may follow bubonic or septicaemic plague, or that may be acquired directly by inhaling infectious droplets from a patient with plague pneumonia.



How do humans get plague?

- Bites of infected fleas;
- Direct contact with infected bodily fluids or tissues while touching a sick or dead animal;
- Inhaling infectious respiratory droplets during close contact with an infected person or animal.



Clinical features and treatment

- Sudden onset, rapid progression;
- Fever, chills, weakness;
- Painful, swollen lymph nodes in the groin, armpit or neck (bubonic plague);
- Shortness of breath, chest pain, cough, bloody sputum (pneumonic plague);
- Multi-organ failure, bleeding (septicaemic plague);
- Plague can be successfully treated with antibiotics if diagnosed and treated promptly.



Prevention

- The risk for average holiday and business travellers is low. Certain activities may expose some to higher risk (e.g. healthcare workers, visiting friends and relatives).

Travellers to Madagascar are advised to:

- Avoid crowded urban areas, and camping/hiking in rural areas affected by the outbreak;
- Avoid close contact with ill persons;
- Avoid contact with rodents and dead animals;
- Use DEET-containing insect repellent to prevent flea bites;
- Obtain medical attention for sudden onset of feverish illness.



Returning travellers

- Returning travellers should be on the alert for the early signs and symptoms of plague, especially fever, cough, and shortness of breath. If concerned, they should seek medical attention immediately and inform the healthcare worker about Madagascar travel.