

Chipmunks and Squirrels Can Carry Plague - Caution Advised

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Chipmunks and Squirrels Can Carry Plague

Health Officials Urge Caution

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Due to increased plague activity in the Tahoe Basin area last fall, El Dorado County health officials advise caution this summer. The California Department of Public Health routinely monitors rodent populations for plague activity in California. Last September and October, a surveillance effort identified three chipmunks as positive for plague in the South Lake Tahoe area; two were found near the U.S. Forest Service Taylor Creek Visitor Center and one was found near the Tallac Historic Site. There were no reports of illness to people. Signs were posted in the areas to alert the public, and individuals were advised to report dead or sick rodents. Signs will continue to be posted throughout this year to help advise the public.

According to El Dorado County Public Health Officer, Dr. Alicia Paris-Pombo, "Plague is naturally present in many parts of California, including higher elevation (mountainous areas) of El Dorado County, so we all need to be cautious around animals that can carry it."

Plague is an infectious bacterial disease that is spread by squirrels, chipmunks and other wild rodents and their fleas. People can become infected through close contact with infected animals or the bite of an infected flea. Plague can be prevented by avoiding contact with these rodents and their fleas, and by keeping pets away from rodents and their burrows. Human cases of plague are rare. Symptoms of plague usually occur within two weeks of exposure to an infected animal or flea, and include fever, nausea, weakness and swollen lymph nodes. Plague can be effectively treated with antibiotics if detected early.

Tips to prevent plague include the following:

- Do not feed squirrels, chipmunks or other wild rodents.
- Never touch sick, injured or dead rodents.
- Do not camp, sleep or rest near animal burrows.
- Look for and heed posted warning signs.
- Leave pets home if possible; otherwise keep pets confined or on a leash. Do not allow pets to approach sick or dead rodents or explore rodent burrows. Protect pets with flea control products.
- Cats can pose a higher risk of plague transmission to humans when they have contact with infected rodents. Keep cats away from rodents. Consult a veterinarian if your cat becomes sick after having been in contact with rodents.
- Wear long pants tucked into boot tops to reduce exposure to fleas, and apply insect repellent containing DEET on socks and trouser cuffs.
- If you become ill after having been in an area where plague is known to occur, consult a physician and tell them you may have been exposed to plague.

State and local health officials will continue to monitor plague-prone areas. To report a sick or dead rodent or for questions about plague, please contact El Dorado County Environmental Management at (530) 573-3450. Additional information about plague can be found at the California Department of Public Health's website at www.cdph.ca.gov/HealthInfo/discond/Pages/Plague.aspx

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