



# News Release

CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH SERVICES

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## STATE HEALTH DIRECTOR OFFERS SAFEGUARDS TO AVOID PLAGUE

SACRAMENTO - Visitors to rural picnic spots, campgrounds and wilderness areas should take precautions to protect themselves from plague, which can be carried by squirrels, chipmunks and other wild rodents, State Health Director Diana M. Bontá, R.N., Dr.P.H., advised today.

Plague is a highly infectious bacterial disease that is spread by rodents and their fleas. When an infected rodent becomes sick and dies, its fleas can carry the infection to other warm-blooded animals, including humans. People also can be exposed through contact with infected cats, which are highly susceptible to the disease.

"Individuals can greatly reduce their risk of becoming infected with plague by taking simple precautions, including avoiding contact with wild rodents," Bontá said. "Do not feed rodents in picnic or campground areas and never handle sick or dead rodents. Leave your pets at home when visiting rural areas."

State and local health officials regularly monitor plague-prone areas. If sick and dying rodents or other evidence of plague are observed and a high risk of transmission to humans is determined, affected areas may be temporarily closed to protect the public and to implement control measures. In California, plague-infected animals are most likely to be found in the foothills, mountains and along the coast. Desert and Central Valley areas are considered low risk for plague.

Since 1970, 38 cases of plague have been confirmed in California. The most recent case occurred in 2000 in a man from Kern County who survived following treatment with antibiotics. Plague was identified last year in wild animals from 15 California counties.

Early symptoms of plague in humans include high fever, chills, nausea, weakness and swollen glands in the neck, armpit or groin. Individuals who develop these symptoms should seek immediate medical attention. With prompt diagnosis and proper treatment, the disease is curable in its early stages, but may be fatal if untreated.

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Other precautions against exposure to plague offered by Bontá include:

- Avoid walking, hiking or camping near rodent burrows.
- Wear long pants tucked into boot tops to reduce exposure to fleas. Spray insect repellent on socks and trouser cuffs.
- Individuals living in areas where plague is known to occur should keep wild rodents out of homes, trailers and outbuildings and away from pets.