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Plague Confirmed in an Aurora Squirrel

Tri-County Health Department has confirmed one case of plague in a dead squirrel found in a residential area near Cherry Creek Reservoir. A total of 14 other squirrels with plague have been confirmed in the metro area so far this year, 13 in the vicinity of Denver's City Park and one in Jefferson County. Residents in the entire Denver metro area should take precautions as a result of these findings. There have been no reports of human cases in Colorado.

"Residents are being warned to protect themselves and their pets from exposure to rodents that may carry fleas," states Dr. Richard Vogt, Executive Director of Tri-County Health Department. "Plague is sometimes seen in prairie dogs since they live in colonies, but tree squirrels live in independent territories, so this is very rare. There has not been a plague outbreak in tree squirrels in metro Denver since 1968."

Plague can be a fatal disease, which is spread by fleas that carry the plague bacteria. These fleas usually feed on rodents, such as prairie dogs, rock squirrels and rabbits. Infected rodents become sick and die. When large populations of rodents die, the fleas must find another host animal, such as humans or pets. If no other host is available, the fleas die off naturally.

Anyone who finds a dead squirrel should call the statewide InfoLine at 1-877-462-2911 to report the location and see if it needs to be saved for testing. It is best to place the dead animal in a plastic bag using gloves or a shovel to minimize any risk of exposure to fleas. It can then be saved for testing or disposed of according to local ordinances.

People can take simple precautions to prevent exposure such as never feeding squirrels and other wild animals, avoiding all contact with rodents, treating pets with flea powder or shampoo, keeping pets on a leash and out of wild rodent habitats, avoiding sick or dead animals, wearing long pants tucked into socks when hiking or in wild rodent areas, using insect repellent with DEET, and trapping mice around the house.

Dogs that are exposed do not usually get sick, but can transport the fleas. Cats that have been infected become ill with a high fever and/or an open sore. Sick cats can also spread the disease to people who handle them. Cats can be treated by a veterinarian if seen promptly.

Plague in humans is easily treated with antibiotics, but treatment is most effective when the illness is diagnosed early. Symptoms usually occur two to six days after being bitten by an infected flea. Symptoms include swollen and tender lymph nodes, fever, chills and extreme exhaustion. People who have been bitten by fleas or had contact with dead rodents and have these symptoms should contact their health care provider immediately, because the illness can progress quickly.

For more information on plague or to report dead squirrels, call the statewide InfoLine at 1-877-462-2911. Extensive plague information is also available on the Tri-County Health Department website at www.tchd.org.

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