

How the family cat infected an Oregon man with Black Death

An Oregon man bitten by his cat has contracted what health officials say is plague, a deadly flea-borne pathogen that killed millions during the Middle Ages.



Wild rats are the most common carrier of the fleas contaminated with plague. An Oregon man is in critical condition after he was somehow infected with the disease by a cat bite.

An Oregon man bitten by his family cat earlier this month was in hospital in critical condition Thursday with what health officials say is the same deadly disease that wiped out a third of Europe's population during the Middle

Ages.

The man, in his 50s, was placed in isolation at a Crook County hospital in central Oregon after he presented classic symptoms of [plague](#), said Karen Yeargain, the county's communicable disease co-ordinator. The diagnosis was confirmed Thursday evening.

Known centuries ago as the "Black Death" for its blackening effect on infected skin, plague is a largely flea-borne bacterial disease, often spread to humans via flea-infested rodents. The disease can be treated with antibiotics if diagnosed early. The first signs are flu-like symptoms — fever, nausea and weakness.

Improved health measures have helped keep plague rates at bay in most countries. The United States reports between 5 and 15 human cases of plague annually, mostly in the Southwest. Canada hasn't had a reported case since 1939, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada.

But the "Black Death" is far from dead. The World Health Organization reports about 1,000 to 3,000 cases of plague every year.

The U.S. strain, said McMaster University evolutionary geneticist Henrik Poinar, dates to the early 1900s, when a plague-infected ship from Asia docked in San Francisco and the disease

spread across the region with the help of wild rodents.

Last year California's public health department warned of a potential spike in rodent populations in 2012 after several months of above-average rainfall and the resulting abundance of food for rodents.

Just last month, a squirrel trapped during routine monitoring at a San Diego campground tested positive for plague. "We're trying to warn people ... don't go camping right on top of squirrel burrows," said Chris Conlan, the county's supervising vector ecologist.

Yeargain described the Oregon patient's story as a "perfect storm scenario" for the potentially fatal disease. The man, who has not been publicly identified, was at his rural home on June 2 when he reached into his cat's mouth to retrieve what he later discovered was a "decayed, dried mouse carcass" and the cat bit his hand.

Since he arrived at the hospital last Saturday, Yeargain said the man's symptoms have worsened from septicemia (blood infection) to pneumonia (lung infection), which, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, is "the most deadly form of plague."