

Media Release

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Take precautions to prevent the spread of animal-borne diseases this summer.

Warmer months are approaching, and that means more time spent enjoying the outdoors. Gunnison County Health and Human Services (HHS) reminds the community that more time spent outdoors can mean an increased risk of getting certain animal-borne diseases. These diseases are more common during the warm weather months since we spend more time in areas where animals are found.

Gunnison County HHS stresses the importance of preventive measures when you and your family are outdoors as well as measures around your homes. Talk to them about these precautions. Below the list of preventive measures is an overview of animal-borne diseases that are present in our area and around the State:

- Wear insect repellent and appropriate clothing when heading outdoors.
- Pets should be kept up to date on vaccinations, kept on a leash when directed to on trails and protected from fleas and ticks.
- Do not feed or handle wild animals, especially those that appear sick. Do not handle dead wild animals or wild animal waste.
- Contact a local exterminator or mosquito control company for pest management inside and outside of your home.

Rabies is a virus that infects animals and can also infect people. When it is untreated, it is usually fatal. It is found in skunks, foxes, racoons, bats and other mammals.

- **Symptoms of rabies:** In people, the symptoms are similar to the flu (weakness, discomfort, fever, headache) and some may experience itchiness or prickling at the bite site. When symptoms progress, cerebral dysfunction, anxiety, confusion, and agitation can occur along with delirium, abnormal behavior, hallucinations, hydrophobia (fear of water), and insomnia. In animals symptoms are similar and can include vomiting and not eating.
- **How is it contracted?** People and pets commonly contract rabies from the bite or scratch of an infected animal. Animals that can be infected with rabies are bats, racoons, skunks and foxes.
- **What to do if you think an animal is rabid:** If you suspect a wild animal in your area is sick with rabies, reach out to the local Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW) Office at (970) 641-7060. If a bat is present in a house, it is important to safely trap and test the bat for rabies. You can visit the Center for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC) website for more information on trapping bats in your home safely by visiting <https://www.cdc.gov/rabies/animals/bats/index.html>. Call Gunnison County HHS to report an encounter with a suspected rabid animal.

- **How to protect myself and pets from rabies:** Always vaccinate your pets (even indoor pets) against rabies to keep them and your family safe. Avoid contact with wild animals and their feces. Do not approach sick animals. Call CPW if you suspect a wild animal is sick or rabid.

Plague is frequently detected in rock squirrels, prairie dogs, wood rats, and other species of ground squirrels and chipmunks and is caused by a bacteria.

- **Symptoms of plague:** Because the plague can present in multiple ways, whether it affects the immune system or the lungs, symptoms can vary but the most common are fever, chills, swollen lymph nodes, weakness and respiratory problems.
- **How is it contracted?** It can be transmitted to people through the bites of infected fleas or by direct contact with infected animals.
- **What to do if you suspect an animal has plague:** If a colony of prairie dogs you usually see suddenly disappears, report this to the local CPW office
- **How to protect yourself and pets from plague:** If there has been plague identified in your area, you should take precautions for yourself, your family and your pets to avoid the area and flea bites. Talk to your veterinarian about applying flea and tick control on your pets to help keep them and your family safe.

West Nile Virus is a disease that can cause encephalitis (inflammation of the brain) and meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord).

- **Symptoms of West Nile Virus:** Symptoms of this virus may vary from high fevers, body aches, vomiting, diarrhea and fatigue to more serious symptoms like encephalitis which is swelling in the brain.
- **How is it contracted?** West Nile Virus is carried by mosquitoes and can be passed on to people through mosquito bites.
- **How to protect yourself from West Nile Virus:** Use insect repellent when going outdoors and empty containers with standing water around your homes to reduce the number of mosquitos on your property. Contact the local mosquito control company VDCI for further guidance and information for mosquito control on your property. Their website is <https://www.vdci.net/>

Hantavirus is most commonly carried by the deer mouse in our area, and is present in its droppings, urine, and saliva.

- **Symptoms of hantavirus:** In North America, exposure to the hantavirus can lead to Hantavirus Pulmonary Syndrome (HPS). HPS is a severe, sometimes fatal, respiratory disease. Symptoms of HPS are fatigue, fever and muscle aches, headaches, dizziness, chills, and abdominal problems, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and abdominal pain and progress to include coughing and shortness of breath.
- **How is it contracted?** When cleaning up dried mouse droppings or urine, the virus can be stirred up in dust and people may contract hantavirus by breathing in the contaminated air.
- **How to protect yourself from hantavirus:** When cleaning up mouse droppings, ventilate the area by opening windows and doors and consider wearing a mask. Wear gloves and spray all droppings down with a bleach solution (one-part bleach to nine parts water) or an EPA-registered disinfectant until soaked and let it sit for five minutes. Use a paper towel to pick up the urine and droppings and then clean the area with the approved disinfectant. Dispose of any materials used for cleaning immediately.

Tularemia is a bacteria found in rodent and rabbit populations.

- **Symptoms of tularemia:** Symptoms of Tularemia can vary depending on how the bacteria was introduced into the body but all involve fevers that can go as high as 104°F. If the bacteria was introduced through a bite, a skin ulcer can develop along with swelling of lymph nodes. Sometimes only the lymph nodes swell. If introduced through the eyes when dressing animals after hunting, eye irritation with lymph node swelling can occur. If contaminated food or water was consumed, then sore throat, mouth ulcers, tonsillitis, and swelling of lymph glands in the neck can occur. The most serious form of Tularemia is when the respiratory system is affected and those symptoms are cough, chest pain, and difficulty breathing.
- **How is it contracted?** It is transmitted by insect bites (flies and ticks), direct contact with an infected animal, inhaling contaminated dirt or soils when farming or landscaping or ingestion of contaminated water. Only a small amount of bacteria is needed to infect a person, and the bacteria can survive for long periods of time in the environment in water, soil, and infected dead animals.
- **How to protect yourself from tularemia:** Wear gloves when handling animals while hunting, trapping, or processing animals after hunting. Do not mow over sick or dead animals when landscaping.

Tick-Borne Diseases

Colorado Tick Fever is the most common tick-borne disease in Colorado, though most cases go unreported.

- **Symptoms of Colorado Tick Fever:** The most common symptoms are fever, chills, headache, muscle aches and pain, and, lethargy. The disease is not life-threatening and infection results in lifelong immunity. There is currently no preventive vaccine or effective medical treatment. You should still reach out to your doctor if you think you have Colorado tick fever.
- **How is it contracted?** Through the bite of an infected tick.

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever is spread by the Rocky Mountain wood tick.

- **Symptoms of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever:** A rash often appears a few days later if bitten by an infected tick. Symptoms include high fever, severe headache, lethargy, muscle aches and pains, swelling around the eyes and back of hands, nausea, vomiting or decreased to no appetite. If not treated, symptoms can progress to altered mental state, respiratory issues, severe skin damage and possibly multiorgan system damage. Contact your doctor right away if you experience symptoms to determine if treatment should be started right away. Prompt medical attention is extremely important because Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever can be fatal if treatment is delayed.
- **How is it contracted?** Through the bite of an infected rocky Mountain wood tick.

How to protect yourself from tick bites: Wearing insect repellent, long layers and tall socks with boots when outdoors in areas with high brush, grasses and trees can help prevent ticks from getting onto your skin. Wear a hat to prevent them from getting on your head and in your hair. Protect your pets from ticks by talking with your pet's veterinarian about tick control. Ticks can crawl off of pets and onto people when they get home.

To learn more about the symptoms, treatments, and other information about these diseases, contact Gunnison County HHS at 970-641-3244 or visit the [Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment](#) or [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) websites.

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