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# TTU expert addresses concerns about prairie dogs and the plague

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By Caitlyn Nix, News Reporter



Source: KCBN Photo

LUBBOCK, TX (KCBN) - The New Mexico Department of Health says three cases of the plague have been confirmed this month in Santa Fe County.

The plague can be transmitted to humans through the bites of infected fleas, rodents, or even pets. But should we be alarmed here on the South Plains?

"Plague does occur in this area, it's just that human cases don't typically occur," said Dr. Steven Presley, with the Texas Tech

Department of Environmental Toxicology.

The plague is a zoonotic disease that is cycled in and around animals.

One rodent we see all across Lubbock can carry the plague. Dr. Presley says black-tailed prairie dogs are the primary reservoir for the plague in this region.



When the plague occurs in a prairie dog colony, it kills 90-95 percent of the prairie dogs, and when that happens, that's when other rodents, pets, or even humans could be exposed.

"Fleas that are on those dead prairie dogs, they need a blood meal. So, they are going to come up to the surface and look for the next mammal to come by," Presley said.

But, that shouldn't cause too much of a concern.

"It's called an epizootic die off because it just happens in that colony," Presley said. "And it's usually, they're all dead and the fleas are all gone before anybody recognizes that that colony has died out."

Which raises the question, what would it take for the plague to spread?

"A few infected fleas coming into the area on a coyote or into a prairie dog colony and it becomes established," said Presley.

Presley said to try and keep your dogs or even cats out of prairie dog colonies.

But, this doesn't mean the plague is a serious concern for those in this region.

"It's not like you're going to walk into a prairie dog colony and the fleas are all gonna come running to ya," Presley said.

Active colonies raise no threats, but when you start to see spider webs over the burrows, you know that colony has started dying off and you shouldn't go around it.

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