

Plague Found in Wyoming Big Cats

Veterinary lab warns that indoor/outdoor housecats are at risk.

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The University of Wyoming's state veterinary laboratory urges domestic cat owners in the town of Jackson and in the Greater Yellowstone Area to protect themselves after two big cats were found to have the bubonic plague.

A mountain lion and her kitten that were found dead this fall near Jackson have tested positive for the plague, Ken Mills said Dec. 14. Mills is a professor at the University of Wyoming's College of Agriculture's Department of Veterinary Sciences, which manages the veterinary lab.

Mills said owners of domestic cats stricken with the disease are susceptible to the disease, as are hunters coming in close contact with infected big cats. Cats can contract the plague through eating an infected rodent or from an infected host's flea bites.

"The interesting thing about the latest finding is that the mother and one of her kittens died from the plague, but the other kitten is doing fine. We don't know if the other kitten was exposed and survived," said Cynthia Tate, an assistant veterinarian with the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.

Occasionally finding the plague in domestic cats, as well as in animals such as mountain lions and bobcats, isn't surprising because they eat rodents, and rodents are the typical carriers, Tate said.

"The plague could be a risk to mountain lion hunters, but I see it as more of a risk to the owners of domestic cats allowed to go outside and hunt rodents. If your cat develops a fever and has swollen lymph nodes, it is definitely time to call a veterinarian," Mills said.

There have been five human cases of the bubonic plague in Wyoming since 1978, according to the Wyoming Department of Health.