

Homeless Update: Typhus Outbreak in Los Angeles



By Alex Berezow — October 6, 2018



Credit: [salewskia/Wikipedia](#) [1]

Downtown Los Angeles has been hit by typhus, a disease that most people probably have never heard of. What is it, and how did it happen?

Typhus is an infectious disease that causes [symptoms](#) [2] such as fever, malaise, headache, chills, muscle pain, rash, vomiting, and diarrhea. In this case, the outbreak was probably caused by the bacterium *Rickettsia typhi* or *Rickettsia felis*, both of which are spread by fleas. There are a lot of weird things in downtown L.A., but fleas? Where did they come from?

L.A.'s public health department [provides a clue](#) [3]: "Places where there is an accumulation of trash that attract wild animals like feral cats, rats and opossums that may carry an infected flea may increase the risk of exposure." They then provide tips for pet owners on how to prevent typhus.

That's perfectly fine advice, except the outbreak didn't occur among pet owners. According to [Outbreak News Today](#) [4], all the cases live or work downtown, six of whom are homeless. But, apparently, the [press release](#) [3] from the County of Los Angeles Public Health didn't mention it. That rather unpleasant fact had to be reported by [local news outlets](#) [5], instead.

Several months ago, the *Los Angeles Times* wrote a [scathing editorial](#) [6] about how the city's homelessness crisis is a "national disgrace." So, no wonder the public health department swept this latest ordeal under the rug.

How Many Must Die Before We Solve the Homelessness Crisis?

Thankfully, typhus is easily treatable and nobody has died. But that's often not the case. Down the road in San Diego, a hepatitis A outbreak among that city's homeless killed 20. *Streptococcus* killed three homeless people in Anchorage. In Seattle, there was an outbreak of "trench fever," a

disease associated with the unsanitary conditions facing soldiers in World War I. Tuberculosis remains a big problem among homeless people across the country.

What is it going to take to wake America up? How many more people have to die before we realize that there is a humanitarian crisis happening on the sidewalks of our major cities?

Nobody knows. Which is why we can fully expect hundreds if not thousands more people to die from diseases of the 19th Century. You can thank your local politicians for doing nothing to solve the problem, and in some cases, actively enabling it.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/10/06/homeless-update-typhus-outbreak-los-angeles-13483>

Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Los_Angeles#/media/File:Los_Angeles,_Winter_2016.jpg

[2] <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5845a4.htm>

[3] <http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/phcommon/public/media/mediapubhpdetail.cfm?prid=1930>

[4] <http://outbreaknewstoday.com/los-angeles-reports-outbreak-endemic-flea-borne-typhus-75658/>

[5] <https://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Public-Health-Reports-Several-Cases-of-Typhus-495197621.html>

[6] <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-homeless-crisis-overview-20180225-htmllstory.html>