US approves new treatment for ancient plague

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Hardly anyone succumbs to the bubonic plague these days, but US health authorities on Friday approved a new treatment for it and other forms of the potentially deadly bacterial infection.

Levaquin, manufactured by New Jersey-based Janssen Pharmaceuticals Inc., a pharmaceutical company of Johnson & Johnson, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration for treatment of plague and to reduce the risk of getting it after exposure to Yersinia pestis, the bacterium that causes the disease.

"Primarily an animal disease, plague can be spread to humans through bites from infected fleas, contact with infected animals or humans, or laboratory exposure," the FDA said.

"Yersinia pestis also is considered a biological threat agent, which could potentially be used as a bioterrorism agent."

The FDA noted that there are just 1,000 to 2,000 cases worldwide of plague each year.

The drug was approved after studies showed it was effective in monkeys because there are not enough cases of plague in humans to conduct a satisfactory clinical trial, the agency said.

The three most common kinds of the disease are bubonic plague, which involves an infection of the lymph nodes; pneumonic plague, an

infection of the lungs; and septicemic plague, which affects the blood.

Other FDA-approved treatments for plague include streptomycin, doxycycline, tetracycline, and other antibacterial drugs in the tetracycline group.

The plague, also known as the "Black Death," spread through Europe in the mid-14th century, killing tens of millions of people.

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