

Missing lab mice infected with plague

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The FBI and New Jersey officials have started a hushed but intensive search for three missing lab mice reportedly infected with deadly strains of plague.

The mice were discovered missing from separate cages at a bioterrorism research facility in Newark more than two weeks ago, but the incident was only confirmed Wednesday by the Newark (N.J.) Star-Ledger.

The research lab, located at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, is operated by the Public Health Research Institute, a center for infectious disease research.

The mice reportedly were infected with the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* that causes bubonic and other forms of plague.

Scientists, however, said with modern antibiotics, plague can be treated if quickly diagnosed and is not the scourge that wiped out a third of Europe during the 14th century.

Richard Ebright, a Rutgers University microbiologist and a critic of the government's rapid expansion of bio-terrorism labs, said federal guidelines call for only minimal security at such laboratories -- a lock on the lab door and a lock on the sample container and cage.

"You have more security at a McDonald's than at some of these facilities," Ebright told the newspaper.

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