

Leptospirosis

What is it?

Leptospirosis is an infection, caused by bacteria called leptospires. It generally starts suddenly with flu-like symptoms. People get infected by contact with animal urine infected with leptospires. It usually takes 5 – 14 days for the symptoms to develop. In some cases it may take 2 – 30 days.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- A high fever
- Chills
- Severe headaches
- Muscle pain
- Redness in the eyes
- Abdominal pain
- Jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes)
- Bleeding in mucus membranes and under the skin (including bleeding in the lungs)
- Vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Rash

The illness lasts from a few days to 3 weeks or longer, but severe exhaustion can continue for months.

How serious is it?

It can vary from a mild illness to a severe one (e.g. meningitis and kidney or respiratory failure) which can be fatal.

What is the treatment?

You must see a doctor immediately, who will prescribe a course of antibiotics. Early treatment is essential to stop the illness from becoming severe.

How do you get leptospirosis?

Humans get it from contact with infected animal urine or water which has such urine in it. The leptospires get in through cuts or broken skin or through eyes, mouth or nose.

You can get it while:

- Hunting
- Gardening in farm soil
- Walking barefoot in paddocks or gardens
- Touching sick animals
- Eating or drinking contaminated food or water
- Smoking without washing your hands after animal contact
- Cleaning out sheds where rats, mice or hedgehogs live
- Working in forests
- Wading in flood waters
- Involved in water sports in rivers and lakes and adventure running

Direct person-to-person transmission is very rare.

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Who is most at risk?

It is New Zealand's most common occupationally acquired infectious disease. Workers in the meat processing industry are most at risk, followed by farmers working with animals. Veterinarians are also at risk of leptospirosis.

Prevention

You can protect yourself from infection by avoiding exposure when you are in a risk environment (e.g. cover cuts and abrasions and protect your face from farm animal urine).

There is no vaccine for humans.

If you work in a high-risk industry such as meat processing, farming or stock transport or sales, the Department of Labour has specific leaflets about leptospirosis on its website: www.dol.govt.nz.

Information for farmers on how to protect at risk workers, visit www.leptosure.co.nz.