

Leptospirosis Information Sheet

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What is it?

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by bacteria called leptospires which live in the kidneys and genitals of many types of animals. It is pronounced as lep-toe-spy-row-sis. People get infected by contact with animal urine infected with leptospires.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Leptospirosis usually starts with flu-like symptoms. Symptoms usually start within 5-14 days, but can appear as soon as 2 days, or up to 30 days after contact with the leptospires.

Symptoms include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Sore muscles
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea (runny poo)
- Stomach pain
- Red eyes
- Cough
- Jaundice (yellowish skin and eyes)
- Bleeding in the mucus membranes and under the skin (including bleeding in the lungs)
- Vomiting
- Rash

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.

Who is most at risk?

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

How could I get infected?

People get it from contact with infected animal urine, or water which has infected urine in it. The bacteria get into your body through cuts or broken skin or through the 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
- Playing in rivers or lakes

It is unusual for leptospirosis to be spread from one person to another.

How do I protect myself and others?

You can protect yourself by being careful in a risky environment and not touching animal urine. For

example, cover cuts and grazes and protect your face.

There is no vaccine for humans.

If you work in a high risk job, such as at a meat works, farm or transporting stock, Worksafe has leaflets for you about leptospirosis on its website:

www.worksafe.govt.nz

Will I need to take time off work, school or preschool?

Leptospirosis is rarely spread by people, so you do not have to stay off work or school if you feel well. Some people experience persistent symptoms for a long time after the initial infection. Discuss this with your doctor.

How is it treated?

You must see a doctor immediately, to diagnose leptospirosis and get antibiotics. Early treatment is essential to stop the illness from becoming severe.

Where can I get further information?

For further information on leptospirosis please contact your doctor or Hawke's Bay District Health Board (and talk to the Population Health team) on (06) 834 1815. You can also phone Healthline on 0800 611 116 at any time of the day or night to speak to a registered nurse.