

Leptospirosis

Information Sheet

What is it?

Leptospirosis is an illness caused by the bacteria *Leptospira* that live in wild and domestic animals, including rats, hedgehogs, dogs, cattle, sheep, deer and pigs. There are a number of different strains (serovars) of *Leptospira* which infect different animals; *L.hardjo*, which causes two thirds of the human Leptospirosis cases, has cattle as its main host.

Leptospirosis is a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956. This disease is the most common occupationally acquired disease in New Zealand. People suffering from the illness will be contacted by their local Health Protection Officer to try and establish the source of their illness.

How does a person become infected?

People contract the illness when they come into contact with the urine of infected animals. Transmission is by contact of the skin, especially if damaged, or the mucous membranes of the mouth, nose and eyes with urine, or water, moist soil or vegetation contaminated with urine. Contact with tissues of an infected animal or inhalation of droplets of contaminated fluids may also spread the disease.

Infected animals may appear well but they can pass on the infection.

The people at the greatest risk of infection are:

- Meat processing workers
- Farmers, particularly dairy farmers
- Service workers to these sectors
- Vets, both on the farm and in the meat plant
- Meat inspectors
- Sewage workers

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

The illness usually takes 10 days (range 2 to 30 days) for the symptoms to show after you have been infected. The symptoms commonly include; sudden onset of a fever, headache, chills, eye irritation and muscle pain. Less frequently the case may suffer from meningitis, jaundice and kidney problems. Relapses can occur.

Diagnosis can only be confirmed by tests arranged by a doctor. This should be done promptly to prevent more serious complications occurring.

How bad is it?

The illness is unpleasant and can last for three weeks or longer. Recovery of untreated cases may take several months. After apparent recovery, symptoms are likely to reappear during periods of stress.

For advice, testing and treatment, you will need to visit your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics.

Direct spread from person to person is rare. Care should be taken when handling urine-contaminated articles as the bacteria can be excreted in the urine for a month or more after infection.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Your Health Protection Officer can give you advice on this. Generally you can return to work, childcare or school when you are feeling well enough to attend.

How do I avoid the illness?

This infection can usually be prevented in livestock by vaccinating the animals against Leptospirosis. This prevents the disease in animals and the subsequent infection of humans. Vaccination of livestock is a voluntary process at present although it is estimated that 90% of dairy herds have now been vaccinated. Many pig producers vaccinate their stock but vaccination levels are very low in beef cattle, sheep and deer.

Workers in hazardous occupations should wear protective clothing such as boots, gloves and aprons.

Control rats and mice around your property.

Maintain a high standard of personal hygiene and always ensure cuts, blisters and abrasions are covered with waterproof dressings.

For further information please contact:



MidCentral Public Health Service
Palmerston North: (06) 350 9110
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