

Leptospirosis

Public health information sheet

Leptospirosis, often called lepto, is a disease caused by bacteria called leptospira which live in the kidneys of many types of animals. People get infected by contact with animal urine infected with leptospira bacteria. This enters the body through cuts or scratches in the skin and splashes into the eyes.

Symptoms

The main symptoms of leptospirosis are:

- ↘ fever
- ↘ chills
- ↘ headaches
- ↘ sore muscles
- ↘ nausea
- ↘ diarrhoea (runny poo)
- ↘ stomach pain
- ↘ red eyes
- ↘ cough
- ↘ jaundice (yellowish skin and eyes)
- ↘ vomiting
- ↘ rash

Symptoms usually develop about 10 days after exposure to the leptospira bacteria.

If you have symptoms

If you have symptoms contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free anytime on 0800 611 116.

Mention if you have been near stagnant water / flood water, farm animals or soil that may have been infected by animals.

Early treatment is essential to stop the illness from becoming severe. Some people experience persistent symptoms for a long time after the initial infection. You can discuss this with your doctor.

It is unusual for leptospirosis to spread from one person to another, so you do not have to take time off work or school if you feel unwell.

People who have had leptospirosis are usually immune to the particular strain of bacteria they were infected with, but will not be immune to other strains and could be infected again.

People at greater risk

The bacteria that causes leptospirosis can enter the body through the eyes and through cuts or scratches in the skin. Even a splash of contaminated water in a skin cut, wound or the eyes can be risky.

You're most likely to get leptospirosis when working directly with animals in the meat processing, farming or veterinary industries.

You may also get it from:

- 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 contaminated rivers or lakes
- contact with floodwater or objects contaminated with floodwater.

Prevention

You can protect yourself by being careful in risky environments and not touching animal urine.

Things you can do include:

- covering and cleaning any cuts on your skin
- wearing personal protective equipment in high-risk workplaces, (eg, meat processing facilities, farms, veterinary clinics, forests or the bush)
- avoiding high risk areas if you have open wounds, broken skin (eg, eczema), and if you're pregnant or trying to become pregnant
- washing your hands after animal contact and before you eat, drink or smoke
- getting animals vaccinated (there's no vaccine for humans)
- avoiding swimming in ponds, lakes or rivers that could be contaminated.

For more information

For more information visit:

- healthify.nz/leptospirosis