

Leptospirosis and Weil's disease

What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by bacteria. It is passed from animals to humans. It is more common in warmer countries, but is also found in temperate countries, including the United Kingdom (UK).

Who gets leptospirosis?

Anyone can get leptospirosis but it is more common in adult men and people who:

Work on farms or handle animals (wild, or farmed animals, especially rodents)

Are in contact with canals, rivers and other watercourses

Work in drainage ditches and sewers

Engage in recreational activities on the water *ie* swim and scuba dive, canoeing, sail, windsurf

Go caving and underground exploring

How do you get leptospirosis?

You can be infected through direct or indirect contact with infected animal urine, fluids or tissue. Indirect exposure through water or soil (and in some countries foodstuffs and water) contaminated by urine from infected animals is also a common way to become infected. The bacteria enter the body through cuts in the skin, and through the skin lining the mouth and nose and the membrane at the front of the eye. Many rats are infected and can pass the infection to people.

Person-to-person spread is very rare, if it occurs at all.

How do you avoid getting leptospirosis?

No human vaccine is available in the UK, although there are vaccines for cattle, dogs, and other animals. People who are at risk, either through their job or recreational activities, should wear footwear and dry suits if possible, and should always wash or shower after their activity.

Both these groups should take care to cover all cuts and grazes with a waterproof dressing before going near water or animals. Protective clothing should be worn at work.

Catching the disease from pets is rare. Dogs are often vaccinated against leptospirosis – it is possible to catch the disease from dogs that have recently been in contaminated water including gravel pits or rivers. Those who work with dogs may also be at risk. Leptospirosis is rare in cats and captive-bred rodents that have not been exposed to the bacteria. There have been recent cases among golfers who have become infected while retrieving balls from stagnant pools.

What are the symptoms of leptospirosis, how long do they take to appear and how long do they last?

As many of the symptoms are similar to those for other diseases, a diagnosis is based on information on occupation or recreational activity, and is confirmed by a blood test in the laboratory.

There are two main types of leptospirosis. The more common and less serious form of the disease often resembles influenza, with fever, muscle aches, conjunctivitis and sometimes vomiting.

The more serious form (also known as Weil's disease) causes severe illness. This may start suddenly with fever, headache, muscle aches, conjunctivitis, vomiting and diarrhoea or constipation.

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Symptoms develop normally 7 to 14 days after contact with the infection but they can develop in as little as three days or as long as 30 days.

What is the treatment for leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is treated with antibiotics, which should be given as soon as possible. Serious cases are treated in hospital and some people may need kidney dialysis.

Are there any complications?

The more serious form of the disease can lead to an enlarged liver and kidney failure.

The Health Protection Agency and leptospirosis

We provide advice about the illness and prevention and specialist laboratory reference testing.

More information about the Health Protection Agency and about leptospirosis is available on our website www.hpa.org.uk

If you have concerns about your health contact NHS Direct on 0845 4647 or visit their website www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk, or see your family doctor.

If you have any further questions, please contact

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April 2007

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