

Leptospirosis Fact Sheet

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by a bacterium known as *Leptospira*

Leptospirosis is spread by contact with urine from infected animals

Humans usually become infected when the eyes, nose, mouth, or broken skin come in contact with water or damp soil contaminated with urine of infected animals. The disease can also be spread by direct contact with urine or tissues of infected animals, or by eating urine-contaminated foods. Many wild and domestic animals, including cattle, pigs, rodents, and dogs can carry *Leptospira*. Some infected animals become sick, while others show no signs of illness. Some animals become long term carriers of the disease. *Leptospira* live in warm, wet environments.

People at increased risk for leptospirosis are those who:

- Have contact with contaminated freshwater streams or ponds (campers, swimmers, waders, rafters, hunters)
- Work with animals or in warm moist environments (farmers, slaughterhouse workers, veterinarians, military troops, rice and sugarcane-field workers, sewer workers)
- Drink surface water that has not been properly treated
- Live in tropical climates

Symptoms to look for include:

- High fever and chills
- Severe headache
- Muscle aches
- Nausea and vomiting
- Jaundice (yellow skin and eyes)
- Red eyes
- Abdominal (stomach) pain
- Diarrhea
- Rash

Symptoms begin from 4 to 19 days (usually 10 days) after exposure to *Leptospira*. Some infected persons have no symptoms, but most people with leptospirosis have a mild or flu-like illness. A few people will develop a more severe form of the disease known as 'Weil's disease' with liver and kidney damage, low blood pressure, and difficulty breathing. The illness can last from a few days to 3 weeks or longer.

Leptospirosis can be treated with antibiotics

Treatment with antibiotics may shorten the illness and prevent complications. See your doctor right away if you think you may have leptospirosis.

Leptospirosis can be prevented by:

- Avoiding drinking untreated water.
- Avoiding swimming or wading in water that might be contaminated with animal urine.
- Wearing protective clothing (aprons, gloves, and boots) if there is risk for exposure to infected animals or contaminated water or soil.
- Controlling rodents and mice where you live, work, and play.
- Vaccinating dogs and farm animals (vaccination of an animal helps protect it from the disease but does not prevent the spread of bacteria).