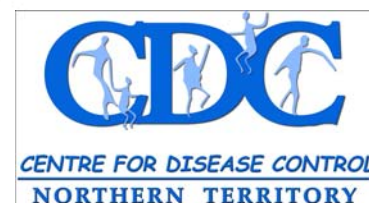


Leptospirosis



What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is an acute infectious disease caused by over 200 different types of the *Leptospira* bacteria.

How is it spread?

The bacteria can be carried by both domestic and wild animals, including pigs, cattle, rats, dogs, possums, deer and foxes.

Humans pick up the infection through contact with water, wet soil or vegetation that is contaminated with the urine of infected animals. Cuts or grazes in people's skin or splashes of infected fluid to the eye increase the risk of infection.

The bacteria may be excreted in the urine of infected people, however the disease is rarely passed from person to person.

Where does leptospirosis usually occur?

Leptospirosis occurs worldwide. Rats are considered the most significant carrier of leptospirosis worldwide. The Fogg Dam / Harrison Dam area outside of Darwin is home to a very large and dense population of the 'dusky rat' (*Rattus colletti*), a native rat. Cases in 2000 were infected from this area.

Other Northern Territory cases have been reported from Oenpelli, Finnis River, rural

Darwin properties and the Katherine district. Since 1991 case numbers appear to be increasing with 29 cases of leptospirosis reported to the end of 2003. There are usually 1-4 cases each year with the exception of 2000, when 8 cases were reported.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms generally occur 10 days after becoming infected but may range from 4 to 19 days. The illness lasts from a few days to 3 weeks or longer.

The symptoms come on suddenly and may include fever, headaches, chills, severe muscle pain (in calves and thighs) and bloodshot eyes.

Sometimes the fever may go up and down and other symptoms such as a rash, jaundice (yellow skin or eyes), confusion, depression, kidney failure and meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain) may occur.

Some infected people may have only mild or no symptoms.

Who is at risk?

The disease is an occupational hazard for those working on the land or with animals eg abattoir workers, farmers, vets, rice and sugarcane field workers and a recreational hazard to campers, bathers and sportsperson eg white water rafters,



kayakers and hunters. Recent cases in the NT have been in turtle and duck/goose hunters.

What is the treatment?

Prompt specific antibiotic treatment, as early in the illness as possible, is essential.

How can leptospirosis be prevented?

There is no human vaccination against leptospirosis. Vaccinations are available for dogs, cattle and pigs against some strains of leptospira.

The public, employers and those working in hazardous occupations need to be aware of the disease and the way it is spread.

Personal protective measures include:

- Avoid swimming or wading in water that may be contaminated.

- Cover all cuts or abrasions with waterproof dressings.
- Thoroughly wash hands and arms in soapy water after handling animals or carcasses, or after coming into contact with liquids that may be contaminated.
- Shower thoroughly after contact with potentially contaminated water or soil.
- Avoid hand to mouth, nose to eye contact (and especially smoking) while handling animals that may be infected.
- Gloves, eye shields, aprons and boots should be worn at all times when handling animals or liquids contaminated with the urine of animals.
- Prevent contamination of living and recreational areas with the urine of infected animals eg keep working dogs out of the house yard.
- Do not feed dogs on raw feral meat because this may infect them.

For more information contact your nearest Centre for Disease Control.

Darwin	89228804
Katherine	89739040
Nhulunbuy	89870282
Tennant Creek	89624259
Alice Springs	89517548