



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

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Leptospirosis

What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by bacteria (germs) that affects humans and animals. In people it causes a wide range of symptoms but some infected persons may have no symptoms at all. Untreated infection could cause kidney damage, meningitis (inflammation of the lining around the brain and spinal cord), liver failure, and breathing problems. In rare cases death occurs.

How do people get leptospirosis?

People get this disease through contact with the infected urine of people or dogs. Outbreaks of leptospirosis are usually caused by touching or swallowing water or soil that has been contaminated with the urine of infected animals. The bacteria can also get into a person's body through eating food contaminated with these bacteria, through a cut in the skin or through mucous membranes (eyes, nose, mouth, or anus). The disease rarely spreads from person to person.

Where is leptospirosis found?

Leptospirosis occurs worldwide. The bacteria have been found in cattle, pigs, horses, dogs, rodents, and wild animals. It is an occupational hazard for many people who work outdoors or with animals (i.e. farmers, sewer workers, veterinarians, fish workers, dairy farmers, or military personnel). Leptospirosis has also been associated with swimming, wading, and whitewater rafting in contaminated lakes and rivers. The incidence is increasing among urban children.

What are the symptoms of leptospirosis?

A person usually becomes sick between 2 days to 4 weeks after being exposed. After 1 or 2 weeks, most people will develop symptoms.

Leptospirosis occurs in two phases: the first phase can include fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, conjunctivitis, vomiting, and diarrhea. The person may recover for a time but then become ill again. The second phase is more severe. In the second phase, people may experience kidney or liver failure or develop meningitis. This phase is called Weil's disease.

Although most people are sick from 1 to 3 weeks, left untreated, recovery can take several months.

How is leptospirosis treated?

Leptospirosis is treated with antibiotics, which should be given as early as possible. People who think they might have leptospirosis should contact a health care provider immediately.

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How can leptospirosis be prevented in people?

The risk of acquiring leptospirosis can be greatly reduced by not swimming or wading in water that might be contaminated with animal urine. Protective clothing or footwear should be worn by those exposed to contaminated water or soil because of their job or recreational activities.

If your dog has been diagnosed with leptospirosis, here's what you can do:

- Keep your dog in your house or yard to prevent spread of disease.
- Do not let your dog urinate in or near ponds, pools, or puddles.
- Always wash your hands after touching anything that might have your dog's urine on it.
- If you are cleaning where there is dog urine, use an anti-bacterial cleaning solution or a solution of 1 part bleach in 10 parts water.
- Make sure that your dog takes all of its medicine.

**For more information, please contact
Boston Public Health Commission
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