

## Q and A – Leptospirosis

### What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by bacteria called *Leptospira* which live in the kidneys and genitals of many types of animals. It is pronounced as lep- toe-spy-row-sis. People get infected by contact with animal urine infected with *Leptospira*.

### How common is it?

Around 100 people in New Zealand catch leptospirosis annually, mainly in rural areas. Auckland has had eleven cases this year, which is similar to previous years. Flooding often leads to people having contact with river or stream water contaminated with animal urine and, or cleaning up soil or properties where there had been rats or other feral animals.

### Where's the greatest risk?

People living or working on rural properties, farms and in meat processing are most at risk from the bacteria in farm animals, vermin and feral animals like rats, possums or hedgehogs.

The next greatest risk is from contact with stagnant water which has been contaminated with cattle or rat urine, especially if you have open wounds.

Any fresh or untreated water in rural areas may have this bacteria – ponds, canals, lakes, rivers, creeks and floodwater. There's no risk of infection from sea water.

Swimming or wading in contaminated waters poses the greatest risk to most people. Fishing, kayaking and other recreational water activities present a lower risk. Even a splash of contaminated water in a skin cut, wound or eyes can be risky.

The bacteria enters the body through the eyes and through cuts or scratches in the skin.

### How do I stop getting leptospirosis?

The best prevention is to understand where this infection might be caught, and to take precautions before you go near untreated water like floodwater, lakes, ponds and rivers. Assess the risk of contamination when considering entering fresh water, particularly be aware of stagnant or floodwater.

If you are in contact with farm animals, you should cover any cuts, and wash your hands after contact and before you eat, drink or smoke.

Local projects to reduce rat numbers, for example linked to Predator Free NZ, should help too.

## **What are the symptoms? What do I do if I have been in risky water?**

The main symptoms of leptospirosis are:

- Fever
- Chills
- Headache
- Sore muscles
- Nausea
- Diarrhoea (runny poo)
- Stomach pain
- Red eyes
- Cough
- Jaundice (yellowish skin and eyes)
- Vomiting
- Rash

Symptoms develop about 10 days after exposure to the leptospira bacteria. Please see your doctor immediately and mention that you may have been exposed if you have been near stagnant or floodwater, farm animals or soil that may have been infected by animals. Early treatment is essential to stop the illness from becoming severe.

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 well enough.

Some people experience persistent symptoms for a long time after the initial infection. Discuss this with your doctor.

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 get infected again.

### **Further information**

<https://healthify.nz/health-a-z/l/leptospirosis/>