

# LEPTOSPIROSIS & WEIL'S DISEASE

Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection carried by rats and other animals and excreted in their urine. This urine can contaminate water, moist soil and vegetation with the *Leptospira* bacterium. Humans can acquire the infection if contaminated material contacts abraded skin, mucous membranes, (mouth, eyes and nose,) or is ingested. Lake and river water can be contaminated though the bacterium cannot survive in dry conditions or salt water. The risk of infection is greater in stagnant and slow moving water.

Weil's disease is the severe form of Leptospirosis resulting in Jaundice.

## Level of Risk

An average of 3 people a year contract Leptospirosis. It is very rare and progression to Weil's disease even rarer. Weil's disease is however a serious illness requiring prompt diagnosis and treatment with antibiotics which will limit the infection. Death can occur in about 15% of cases of Weil's though many cases recover without treatment.

## Symptoms

Symptoms usually occur 5 to 14 days after exposure, with a range of 2 to 30 days.

These usually take the form of a 'flu' like illness which resolves in 2 – 3 weeks.

Symptoms include: Fever, chills, muscle pains and aches, headaches, sore eyes, abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, skin rashes, nose bleeds.

Fever lasts about 5 days and if infection progresses there will be increase in symptoms and possible development of jaundice and kidney failure.

## Diagnosis

If you think you may be infected go to your doctor and explain that there may be a risk of Leptospirosis. Diagnosis is by clinical suspicion. Blood tests can confirm the diagnosis but rarely in time to affect treatment.

For testing within 24 hours Blood samples should be sent directly to:-

The Leptospirosis Reference Unit  
Public Health Laboratory  
County Hospital  
Hereford HR1 2ER

Mild infections can be treated with antibiotics (Tetracycline), more severe infections with intravenous Penicillin. Contraction of Weil's disease would require hospital admission.

Infection confers immunity to the same strain but not other strains of *Leptospira*.

## **Precautions**

Avoid contact with water if you have open cuts or sores, or ensure all cuts and abrasions are adequately covered by a waterproof plaster. Always wear footwear to avoid cutting feet.

Avoid drinking pond water.

Avoid capsizing in suspect water.

Where possible shower soon after sailing or skiing.

If in doubt contact your doctor early.

## **BE AWARE**

The disease is curable if recognised in time, but many doctors will never have encountered it. If you have any reason to suspect that you may have been infected, you may need to draw your doctor's attention to the possibility that the symptoms could be Weil's Disease.

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