

Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that affects both humans and animals and can cause serious symptoms. Vaccination of dogs and the use of common sense precautions can reduce the risk of exposure for you, your family, and your pets.

How Leptospirosis is Spread

People and dogs are exposed to the *Leptospira* bacteria via contact with infected urine or contaminated water, food, or soil. Wild animals and rodents are the natural source, but dogs and other domestic animals spread the disease too. The bacteria can enter the body by being swallowed, through contact with mucous membranes such as the eyes, mouth, or nasal passages, or through contact with broken skin.

Leptospirosis is found all over the world but is particularly problematic in warm, tropical climates. Sewer workers and people who work with animals or on farms are at higher risk for exposure. Many people and dogs contact the *Leptospira* bacteria by drinking or swimming in contaminated water while camping or engaging in outdoor water sports.

Symptoms in People

Symptoms appear within a few days or weeks after exposure and include a high fever, headache, chills, muscle aches, vomiting and/or diarrhea, abdominal pain, skin rashes, or jaundice. The disease can cause severe damage to the kidneys or liver, difficulty breathing, or meningitis. Because many of these symptoms are also seen in other more common illnesses, blood and urine tests are needed for diagnosis. Information given by the patient about possible exposure is also very helpful.

Symptoms in Dogs

Symptoms in dogs include fever, vomiting, dehydration and increased thirst, unwillingness to move, and jaundice. However, some dogs do not show any symptoms. Leptospirosis can progress to severe disease of the kidneys or liver, and can be fatal. Blood and urine tests are useful in diagnosis.

Treatment

Leptospirosis is treatable in both pets and people but may require hospitalization. The bacteria are directly treated using antibiotics like Penicillin or Doxycycline and additional medications are used to reduce the symptoms. Intravenous fluids are helpful to reverse dehydration caused by vomiting or diarrhea. The key to effective treatment is prompt medical attention, before the bacteria has a chance to damage the kidneys and liver.

Preventing Leptospirosis

Dogs should be routinely vaccinated against the *Leptospira* bacteria. Unfortunately, there are many subtypes of the bacteria and vaccination against one subtype will not protect against another. Talk to your veterinarian about the most effective vaccine for the subtypes prevalent in your area.

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Avoid drinking or swimming in water that is likely to be contaminated with wild animal urine. Discourage dogs from drinking this water as well.

Control rodents and clean up areas where mice and rats have urinated.

Wear protective clothing if working with contaminated soil or other material on farms, in sewers, or during rodent control. Wash your hands after handling animals or potentially contaminated material.

