

Leptospirosis: Lethal To You And Your Animals

Opinion

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A dog with leptospirosis.

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You may have seen billboards or road signs that say 'Leptospirosis Kills' but have wondered what Leptospirosis is. Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease caused by a bacterium called *Leptospira*.

Leptospirosis is a zoonotic disease, which is the scientific term for a disease that can affect both animals and people. Leptospirosis is usually spread through contact with water, soil or food contaminated with the urine of an infected animal.

Leptospirosis, also known as 'lepto' and 'rat fever', is found throughout the world and is considered a reemerging infectious disease.

Leptospirosis is more prevalent in tropical and subtropical environments and areas with marshy or muddy water. Leptospirosis outbreaks almost always happen after a cyclone or heavy rain as the contaminated urine of affected animals gets washed into drinking water sources like rivers and streams. The bacteria can survive in the environment for many weeks or even months, which enhances its ability to spread.

Leptospirosis can affect various animals including rats, mice, dogs, cats, livestock (cattle, horses, goats, sheep and pigs) and wildlife.

In people, symptoms may include fever and muscle aches. In severe cases, it can cause organ failure, such as in the liver or kidneys. If you think you have leptospirosis, seeing a doctor as soon as possible is important as the disease can be treated with antibiotics.

Leptospirosis in dogs

Dogs infected with leptospirosis may show a range of signs, including fever, tiredness, vomiting, diarrhoea, loss of appetite and yellowing of the eyes. Symptoms can either show up quickly or occur slowly over time. The disease can lead to damage to the liver and kidneys, and if severe, this can be fatal.

Dogs can also have leptospirosis and show no obvious signs. These dogs can disperse the disease-causing bacteria in their urine, posing a risk to other animals and humans coming into contact with their



A reservoir host is an animal that harbors or nourishes a pathogen (a harmful organism) and serves as a source of infection to other animals.

urine.

If your dog shows signs of leptospirosis, the veterinary clinic can check by taking a blood sample to show whether the dog has leptospirosis and then prescribe the correct antibiotic and other treatments that may be necessary.

A vaccination is available to prevent your dog from getting leptospirosis. Making this a regular part of your dog's routine vaccination schedule is essential – especially in areas where the disease is common. At Animals Fiji, we have a combination vaccine that protects your dog against five strains of leptospirosis. Initially the animal receives two vaccines given 3-4 weeks apart and then annually.

Dr Waruna, one of Animals Fiji's qualified veterinarians, said "It

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- As a non-profit charity, Animals Fiji depends on the kindness of donations to continue its work of supporting animals across Fiji.
- To find out more about Animals Fiji's services and how you can help, please get in touch with their Savusavu Clinic at (+679) 998 6253 or Nadi Clinic at (+679) 993 6647 or visit their website at www.animalsfiji.org.

Leptospirosis in cats

Leptospirosis is relatively rare in cats, and they are generally considered more resistant to infection than other animals. While they can still get the disease, the signs are mild and difficult to diagnose. In cats, the risk of contracting disease can be reduced by reducing their contact with contaminated water and wildlife and rodents.

Leptospirosis in farm or working animals

Cattle, pigs, goats, sheep and horses can become infected with leptospirosis. In these livestock, it can cause reproductive issues such as abortion and stillbirth, as well as general health problems. Horses can experience symptoms similar

to dogs, which include fever, tiredness, and kidney problems. Again, the disease is contracted by contact with contaminated water or exposure to other infected animals. If you suspect that your animals have leptospirosis, please contact your nearest Animals Fiji Veterinary Clinic or your closest Veterinary Clinic or the Ministry of Agriculture.

Leptospirosis in people

Leptospirosis can affect humans when they come into contact with water, soil or food contaminated with the urine of infected animals or through direct contact with infected animals. The bacteria can enter the body through cuts or abrasions on the skin, through the eyes, nose or mouth, or by eating infected food, for example, fruit not washed properly or that has been in contact with contaminated water.

Leptospirosis usually starts with symptoms like sudden fever, headache, muscle pain, chills, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain and red eyes. These signs can be similar to the flu, making it hard to diagnose. Symptoms usually take 5 to 14 days to show after being infected and may last from a few days to several weeks.

In severe cases, it can lead to kidney problems and yellowing of the skin (jaundice). In severe cases, hospital care may be needed as it can affect the liver, brain, lungs or heart. The disease can be fatal.

If you show signs of leptospirosis, please visit your doctor to be tested. If the tests show that you have leptospirosis, antibiotics are the likely treatment that can cure the disease.

- To prevent leptospirosis, you can:
- Get vaccines for your pets to protect them.
 - Avoid contact with animal urine or fluids, especially if you have cuts.
 - Avoid swimming, walking in or ingesting water that might have animal urine in it.
 - Wear protective clothing or footwear near soil or water contaminated with animal urine.
 - Always wash your hands and parts of your body that may have come in contact with infected animals.

Are you at risk?

People most at risk of being infected by the *Leptospira* bacteria are those who work with animals, such as farmers, veterinarians, animal caretakers, slaughterhouse workers, fishermen and people who work with fish. People who work in mining or with sewerage can also be at high risk.

People who enjoy outdoor freshwater activities such as kayaking, rafting, swimming in rivers OR FLOOD WATERS can be at an increased risk.

If you are worried about your or your animal's health, visit your doctor or veterinary clinic for advice and treatment.

We urge you to protect your family by practising safe eating and drinking habits, boiling all drinking water before use, and keeping your pets protected by vaccinating them.

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