

Leptospirosis in Animals

Frequently Asked Questions

What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease caused by bacteria in the genus *Leptospira*. Leptospirosis can affect both animals and humans. Many different species of animals can be affected, including dogs, cattle, pigs, horses, rodents, and wild animals. The bacteria that causes leptospirosis is most common in regions with warm climates and a high rainfall, but is found worldwide, including in New Jersey.

How is leptospirosis spread to pets?

The bacteria that causes leptospirosis is spread through the urine of infected animals. The bacteria can then contaminate soil or water in the environment and survive there for weeks to months. A pet can become infected when exposed directly to the urine of an infected animal, or through contaminated water or soil. The bacteria enter through mucous membranes (eyes, nose, or mouth), or through open-wounds (a scratch or cut). Drinking contaminated water is another way a pet can become infected.

What are the symptoms of leptospirosis in pets?

The symptoms of leptospirosis vary. Some pets may not have any clinical signs of infection, while others may have mild signs that quickly resolve. In some cases, severe disease resulting in death may occur. Young pets tend to be more seriously affected than older pets. Possible clinical signs of leptospirosis in dogs include:

- Fever
- Decreased energy, weakness
- Loss of appetite
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Changes in the amount or frequency of urination
- Dehydration
- Yellowing of the skin and mucous membranes (jaundice)
- Inability to have puppies

How is leptospirosis diagnosed in pets?

If you think your pet may have leptospirosis, bring your pet to the veterinarian right away. Since many of the clinical signs associated with leptospirosis can also be caused by other illnesses, your veterinarian may perform a variety of blood tests, urine tests, and imaging to help diagnose the correct disease.

What is the treatment for leptospirosis in pets?

Treatment will depend on the symptoms and severity of illness that your pet has, but generally involves antibiotics and supportive care.

Can pets spread leptospirosis to people?

Leptospirosis is a zoonotic disease, meaning that it can be spread from animals to people. People can become infected from pets through contact with the infected pet's urine, blood, or tissues. Most normal daily activities with pets will not put people at risk for contracting leptospirosis.

What should you do if your pet has leptospirosis?

If your pet has leptospirosis, contact your physician to discuss your exposure and risk. Avoid any contact with your pet's urine, blood, or tissues. If you must clean up your pet's urine, wear appropriate protective equipment including gloves and boots. Thoroughly wash your hands after handling your pet, or after touching materials with your pet's urine or excrement on it. Frequently wash pet bedding and surfaces with which your pet has contact. If you start developing clinical signs consistent with leptospirosis (leptospirosis in humans can cause a wide range of symptoms, but can include: fever, muscle aches, vomiting, diarrhea, or yellow skin and eyes), contact your healthcare provider immediately to discuss a possible exposure to your infected pet.

What can be done to prevent leptospirosis in pets?

A vaccine is available for dogs to prevent leptospirosis, however the vaccine does not provide 100% protection. This is because there are many strains of the bacteria that cause leptospirosis, and the vaccine does not provide immunity against all strains. It is important to get your pet vaccinated again even if it gets leptospirosis because it can still get infected with a different strain. Talk to your veterinarian for more information on vaccination. Reducing your dog's exposure to possible sources of the *Leptospira* bacteria can reduce its chances of infection as well. Make sure infected animals are not coming into contact with healthy animals; if you have multiple pets in the household and one pet has leptospirosis, talk to your veterinarian about risk to your other pets. Rodents can carry and spread the bacteria causing leptospirosis, so rodent control and prevention can also help prevent possible exposures and infection.

Where can I get more information on leptospirosis?

- Your veterinarian or health care provider
- Your local health department (directory of local health departments in NJ: www.state.nj.us/health/lh/documents/lhdirectory.pdf)
- NJ Department of Health: www.nj.gov/health
- American Veterinary Medical Association: www.avma.org
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov/leptospirosis/index.html

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a veterinarian or health care professional.