

Leptospirosis

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 cause leptospirosis is most common in regions with warm climates and a high rainfall, but is found worldwide, including in New Jersey.

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.

Who gets leptospirosis?

It is unknown how many people in New Jersey have leptospirosis. However, people who have contact with infected animals or soil or water where the bacteria are present are at risk for infection. People who work outdoors or with animals may be at increased risk for infection, such as: farmers, mine workers, sewer workers, slaughterhouse workers, veterinarian/animal caretakers, fishermen and people who work with fish, dairy farmers, and military personnel.

How do people get leptospirosis?

The bacteria that cause 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. People 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 people can become infected.

What are the symptoms of leptospirosis?

The symptoms of leptospirosis vary, ranging from asymptomatic or self-limited febrile illness to severe disease. Common symptoms of leptospirosis include:

- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Abdominal pain
- Red eyes
- Chills
- Vomiting
- Jaundice
- Headache
- Diarrhea
- Skin rash

How is leptospirosis diagnosed?

If a healthcare provider suspects leptospirosis, samples of the patient's blood or urine may be examined.

What is the treatment for leptospirosis?

Antibiotics are used to treat leptospirosis (NOTE: It is very important to finish your antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider). Treatment is most effective when started as soon as possible.

What should I do if my 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.

How can leptospirosis be prevented?

- Avoid contact with animal urine or body fluids, especially if there are any cuts or abrasion of the skin
- Do not swim in, walk in, or swallow water that may contain animal urine
- Wear protective clothing or footwear near soil or water that may be contaminated with animal urine
- Talk to your veterinarian for information on vaccines available to help prevent leptospirosis in pets

Where can I get more information on leptospirosis?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health: www.nj.gov/health
- 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.