Leptospirosis

What is leptospirosis?

Two types of leptospirosis infection can affect workers in the UK.

Weil's disease

This is a serious and sometimes fatal infection that is transmitted to humans by contact with urine from infected rats.

The Hardjo form of leptospirosis

This is transmitted from cattle to humans.

What are the symptoms?

Both diseases start with a flu-like illness with a persistent and severe headache, which can lead to vomiting and muscle pains and ultimately to jaundice, meningitis and kidney failure. In rare cases the diseases can be fatal.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who is exposed to rats, rat or cattle urine or to fetal fluids from cattle is at risk. Farmers are now the main group at risk for both Weil's disease and cattle leptospirosis: the cattle form is a special risk for dairy farmers.

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Further information

You or your doctor can get further information from the Employment Medical Advisory Service at any office of the Health and Safety Executive.

For information about health and safety ring HSE's Infoline Tel: 0845 345 0055 Fax: 0845 408 9566 Textphone: 0845 408 9577 e-mail:hse.infoline@natbrit.com or write to HSE, Information Services, Caerphilly Business Park, Caerphilly CF83 3GG.

Other people who have contracted leptospirosis in recent years include vets, meat inspectors, butchers, abattoir and sewer workers. Pest control officers.

Workers in contact with canal and river water are also at risk.

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How might I catch it?

The bacteria can get into your body through cuts and scratches and through the lining of the mouth, throat and eyes after contact with infected urine or contaminated water, such as in sewers, ditches, ponds and slow-flowing rivers. People working in dairy parlours are often in contact with cattle urine. Rat urine may also contaminate animal feed stuffs on farms.

How can I prevent it?

Eradicate rodents. Don't touch them without the correct PPE. Consult your vet about the cattle infection. Wash cuts and grazes immediately with soap and running water and cover all cuts and broken skin with waterproof plasters before and during work.

INDG84 Reprinted 08/06 C500
Printed and published by the Health and Safety Executive

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