

Leptospirosis and Your Pet: A CDC Fact Sheet

This fact sheet is designed to assist pet owners in answering questions related to leptospirosis in pets and the health risk to humans exposed to *Leptospira*-infected pets. See http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/leptospirosis_q_pet.htm

What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is a disease caused by spiral shaped bacteria. It occurs worldwide and can affect humans as well as many wild and domestic animals, including dogs and cats. The disease can be serious for both humans and animals. In people, the symptoms are often like the flu, but sometimes leptospirosis can develop into a more severe, life-threatening illness with infections in the kidney, liver, brain, lung, and heart.

Your pet can get leptospirosis too, and although this is not common, the disease has been diagnosed more frequently in the past few years. The information given here will show you how to protect yourself and your pets from getting leptospirosis and what to do if your pet does become infected.

How do people and animals get leptospirosis?

The bacteria are spread through the urine of infected animals, which can get into water or soil and can survive there for weeks to months. Humans and animals can become infected through contact with this contaminated urine (or other body fluids, except saliva), water, or soil. The bacteria can enter the body through skin or mucous membranes (eyes, nose, or mouth), especially if the skin is broken from a cut or scratch. Drinking contaminated water can also cause infection. Infected wild and domestic animals may continue to excrete the bacteria into the environment continuously or every once in a while for a few months up to several years.

If your pet has become infected, it most likely came into contact with leptospires in the environment or infected animals. Your pet may have been drinking, swimming, or walking through contaminated water. Because of increased building and development into areas that were previously rural, pets may be exposed to more wildlife, such as raccoons, skunks, squirrels, opossums, or deer that are infected with leptospirosis. Dogs also may pass the disease to each other, but this happens very rarely.

What are the signs of leptospirosis in pets?

The clinical signs of leptospirosis vary and are nonspecific. Sometimes pets do not have any symptoms. Common clinical signs reported in dogs include fever, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, refusal to eat, severe weakness and depression, stiffness, severe muscle pain, or inability to have puppies. Generally younger animals are more seriously affected than older animals.

What should I do if I think my pet has leptospirosis?

Contact your veterinarian immediately. Your veterinarian can perform tests to detect the presence of leptospiral antibodies or organism in your pet.

Is there a treatment for leptospirosis in pet animals?

Yes, leptospirosis is treatable with antibiotics. If an animal is treated early, it may recover more rapidly and any organ damage may be less severe. Other treatment methods, such as dialysis and hydration therapy may be required.

The time between exposure to the bacteria and development of disease is usually 5 to 14 days, but can be as short as a few days or as long as 30 days or more.

What should I do if I have been told my pet has leptospirosis?

If your pet has been confirmed by your veterinarian as having leptospirosis, the appropriate action to take will depend on the nature of contact with your pet. Normal daily activities with your pet will not put you at high risk for leptospirosis infection. Types of contacts that are considered to be high risk include direct or indirect contact with urine, blood, and tissues of your pet during its infection. Assisting in the delivery of newborns from an infected animal is also considered a high-risk activity for transmission of leptospirosis.

If you have had these types of high-risk contacts with your pet during the time of its infection, inform your physician. If common symptoms, such as fever, muscle aches, and headaches, occur within 3 weeks after a high-risk exposure, see your physician. Tests can be performed to see if you have this disease.

How can I protect myself and other people when my pet has leptospirosis?

The risk of getting leptospirosis from a dog in standard instances is suspected to be low. The primary mode of transmission of leptospirosis from pets to humans is through direct or indirect contact with contaminated animal tissues, organs, or urine. Always contact your veterinarian and your physician if you have concerns about a possible exposure to an infected animal.

- Do not handle or come in contact with urine, blood, or tissues from your infected pet before it has received proper treatment.
- If you need to have contact with animal tissues or urine, wear protective clothing, such as gloves and boots, especially if you are occupationally at risk (veterinarians, farm workers, and sewer workers).
- As a general rule, always wash your hands after handling your pet or anything that might have your pet's excrement on it.
- If you are cleaning surfaces that may be contaminated or have urine from an infected pet on them, use an antibacterial cleaning solution or a solution of 1 part household bleach in 10 parts water.
- Make sure that your infected pet takes all of its medicine and follow up with your veterinarian.

How can I prevent leptospirosis in my pet?

- Keep rodent problems (rats, mice, or other animal pests) under control. Rodents can carry and spread the bacteria.
- Get your pet vaccinated against leptospirosis. The vaccine does not provide 100% protection. This is because there are many strains (types) of leptospire, 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 of leptospire.