

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.

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

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

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?

- Get rid of rats. Don't touch them with unprotected hands.
- 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.
- Wear protective clothing.

- Wash your hands after handling any animal, or any contaminated clothing or other materials and always before eating, drinking or smoking.

What else should I do?

Report any illness to your doctor. Tell the doctor about your work and show this card. Leptospirosis is much less severe if it is treated promptly. If your doctor decides you have leptospirosis tell your employer, who must then report it to the Incident Contact Centre (Tel: 0845 300 9923). If you are self-employed you must report it yourself.

To the doctor

The card holder's work may expose him/her to the danger of leptospirosis (either *L. icterohaemorrhagiae* or *L. hardjo*). Early diagnosis and treatment are vital in Weil's disease as jaundice is often absent in the early stages. The illness in *L. hardjo* may also be greatly shortened by appropriate antibiotic treatment. (Your local Public Health Laboratory Service or hospital consultant microbiologist should be able to offer advice and serological testing.)

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.

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This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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**are you
at risk?**