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Leptospirosis

Description:

Leptospirosis is a disease that is caused by a number of different bacteria called Leptospira. Leptospira bacteria have been found in both domestic and wild animals. Humans become infected through contact with water, food, or soil contaminated with urine from these infected animals. This may happen by swallowing contaminated food or water, through skin contact or contact with mucosal surfaces such as the eyes, mouth or nose. The disease occurs most commonly in people who are exposed to the bacteria during their work, for example farmers, veterinarians, and meat workers. However there have been cases from exposure through outdoor activities such as swimming, wading and white-water rafting in rivers and lakes.

Symptoms:

The disease varies in severity. Many people experience fever, headaches, and muscle pain. Nausea, vomiting and bloodshot eyes may also occur. If left untreated, some people develop complications. In rare instances, these complications can be fatal.

The illness usually lasts from three days to three weeks. Recovery can take much longer if left untreated.

Treatment:

Prompt treatment with appropriate antibiotics is recommended to avoid complications and prolonged illness.

Health Outcome:

People with leptospirosis usually recover well after antibiotic treatment. Hospitalisation may be required for more complicated cases.

A person who has had leptospirosis can develop the disease again as there are a number of different strains of the bacteria. It is unlikely that they would be reinfected with the same strain.

Prevention:

The Cover-Wash-Clean Up strategy can help to prevent being infected with Leptospira;

Cover all cuts, grazes and abrasions with waterproof dressings or band-aids and wear dry, full-cover boots or shoes, gloves, aprons and long sleeve shirts when handling animals (eg. milking, trimming, tagging and birthing), soil, vegetation or animal feed that is possibly contaminated.

Wash hands thoroughly on a regular basis, and shower after work. Handwashing is particularly important before putting hands to mouth, nose or eyes (such as when smoking or eating). It is also important to wash hands, arms and contaminated clothing immediately after any contact with animals, animal carcasses, animal tissues (eg. aborted material), or liquids that may be contaminated with urine, faeces or blood from animals.

Clean Up both workplace and home. Keeping living and working spaces clean and tidy discourages rodents and minimises the chance of contact with animal urine. The bacteria are readily killed by disinfectants.

You can also prevent the contamination of living and recreational areas by keeping potentially infected animals away from them.

Help and Assistance

For further information, please contact your local doctor or nearest public health unit.

Other resources

More information on leptospirosis can be found on the Clinical and Statewide Services Division (CaSS) webpage at http://www.health.qld.gov.au/qhcss/lepto.asp

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References

Heymann, D. (Ed). 2008. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*, 19th Ed. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association, pp 306-309.

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