

# LEPTOSPIROSIS

## Facts for Transport and Saleyard Workers

**L**EPTOSPIROSIS CAN BE A RISK FOR ANY PEOPLE who come in contact with animal urine or water contaminated by animal urine.

Leptospirosis is a zoonosis, that is a disease of animals that can infect humans. It is caused by bacteria known as leptospires. These multiply in the kidneys of animals and are shed in the urine. Infected urine spreads the infection.

Leptospirosis can be passed on by all farm animals — beef and dairy cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, deer and dogs. Rats can also spread the disease.

### What are the effects of leptospirosis?

Most animals infected with leptospirosis do not show symptoms.

Humans who catch leptospirosis may feel they have a bad case of flu, with headaches and fever. But it can cause death, and some people become seriously ill and need hospital intensive care. Sufferers and their families say it is a “cruel disease.” It can also be very costly.

People may be unable to work for months and have lasting kidney or liver damage. In the worst cases, the disease keeps coming back and they have to give up their job.

### How do people catch leptospirosis?

Usually, from contact with infected animal urine, or with water, pasture or soil that has been contaminated by infected urine. The bacteria can survive for long periods in moist conditions.

People have also been infected by handling stock feeds or hay contaminated by rodent urine.

The most common means of infection is through the eyes, nose and mouth, or cuts in the skin.

Leptospirosis spreads easily. An infected animal sheds millions of leptospires in its urine. A spray or splash of urine can be infectious.

### Who is at risk of infection?

Mainly farmers and meat processing workers.

The risk is greater for people who have uncovered skin cuts or work in wet conditions. The highest risk is for people continually exposed to urine

splash or spray, such as meat processing workers.

But leptospirosis can affect a wide range of people. Recent cases in New Zealand include forestry workers, a fisherman, a possum trapper, an orchardist, a plumber, a saleyard worker and a mechanic servicing stock trucks.

### What are the risks for transport operators?

- Contact with animal urine when loading or unloading stock or checking the truck during stops in transit.
- Emptying or cleaning effluent tanks.
- Urine splashes when hosing down the truck.
- Working underneath the truck and where contaminated water may collect, e.g. in the wheel housing.
- Changing a tyre.



*Regular handwashing is important to avoid catching leptospirosis.*

### What are the risks in the saleyard/stockyard?

- Being splashed with animal urine when you work in or walk past auction sorting pens.
- Being splashed with animal urine when cleaning the area with a high-pressure hose.
- Handling contaminated wooden railings.
- Walking in wet or muddy areas in bare feet or jandals.

### Is stock likely to be infected?

At present, yes. Most pigs and dairy cattle are already being vaccinated, but few beef cattle, sheep or deer. This means that in most cases, the stock that you handle should be treated as if they are infected with leptospirosis.

### Protect yourself as well as possible

Animals can be vaccinated against leptospirosis. The vaccination programme must be long-term

and cover all animals on the farm; other on-farm controls are needed as well. There is no vaccine available against the type of leptospirosis (*ballum*) which is carried by rats.

OSH is working with all sectors involved in meat and dairy production and associated stock services to educate them about leptospirosis and increase the level of vaccination.

### Protect yourself: keep clean, cover up

Good personal hygiene is your best protection against leptospirosis.

- Wash and if possible dry your hands after working with stock or stock effluent, or handling stock feeds and hay.
- Always do this before eating or smoking.
- If you have a beard or moustache, wash your face as well.

Look out for and avoid situations where you might be splashed with urine or with water contaminated urine.



To avoid splashes, use low-pressure hoses for cleaning.

- Use low-pressure hoses for cleaning, and direct them away from people.

In wet conditions, or handling unsettled stock, extra personal protective equipment (PPE) may be needed, such as:

- Goggles or even face mask;
- Overalls;
- Waterproof footwear.

If PPE is contaminated, take it off and store it well away from where people eat. Make sure your family knows about the possible risk of infection so that anyone else who cleans your PPE or puts it through the wash can be careful.



Cover cuts with waterproof

Anyone whose hands are split or grazed should wear gloves.

- Skin cuts should be covered with waterproof dressings, regularly changed.

### Protecting others

All business owners have a responsibility under the Health and Safety in Employment Act to ensure the safety of their staff, people employed on contract, and visitors to the work site.

In the stock sale and transport areas, these can include:

- Livestock buyers, stock agents;
- Visitors to sales and A&P shows;

- Maintenance workers, especially plumbers; tank cleaners, others working in water;
- Children “parked” in a buggy or pram.

Protection against leptospirosis could include:

- Displaying a reminder that leptospirosis may be a risk, to avoid urine splash and spray, and to wash and dry hands before smoking or eating.
- Providing clean toilet and hand-washing facilities with running water and disposable towels.
- First aid advice and a kit.

### First aid if you have been exposed to urine

- Wash face well, flush out mouth and eyes with lots of running water.
- “Bleed” cuts, flush fresh or old cuts and grazes with water.
- See a doctor as soon as you can (within 24 hours).

Tell the doctor that you work with livestock and may have been exposed to leptospirosis.

### Test and treat immediately

Early treatment gives the best chance of a good recovery from leptospirosis. Treatment should be given if you have any suspicion you may have leptospirosis. Do not wait for a diagnosis to be confirmed.

- The doctor should take a blood sample and give antibiotics. IMPORTANT: The sample must be taken **BEFORE** you take any pills.
- Another sample will be needed in about three weeks’ time. This second sample often gives better information about whether you have leptospirosis.

Go to the doctor if you feel:

- Headaches;
- Aching muscles;
- The light hurts your eyes;
- Fever or chills;
- Nausea or vomiting.

Do this if you feel ill, even if you don’t think you have been exposed to animal urine. The sooner treatment starts, the better.

### Find out more:

See *Guidelines for the Control of Occupationally Acquired Leptospirosis*, available from your local OSH branch. You can download this and other information from the OSH Safety Net web site: [www.osh.dol.govt.nz](http://www.osh.dol.govt.nz)