

TOOLBOX TALK
NO.20

Leptospirosis (Weil's disease)



When working near to water or on sites that are otherwise wet, consideration must be given to the health implications associated with the presence of rats.

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.

Weil's disease, is an occupational hazard for anyone working near water, damp areas or anywhere else where rats may be present. It is a disease caused by bacteria that exists mainly in the urine of the infected rats and is therefore also in the water where they live. Work is considered higher risk where there is evidence of rat infestation. This is most likely to be during refurbishment or demolition work. Other potential situations include work linked to canals, rivers or sewers. The bacteria thrives in damp conditions, of riverbanks or streams, and can enter the body through unprotected cuts, scratches, through the lining of the nose or by swallowing the infected water. While you may not be in this environment at work, you may still come into contact during other past time activities.

The symptoms **closely resemble symptoms of flu**:

- Fever
- Headache
- Chill

Later symptoms include

- Tightening of the skin
- A yellowing of the skin
- Internal bleeding

What you should know

The Weil's disease form of leptospirosis is contracted from the urine of infected rats. The bacteria get into your body through cuts and scratches or through the lining of the mouth, throat and eyes after contact with infected urine or contaminated water. It is a rare condition in the UK but never the less a real risk. The disease starts with flu-like symptoms such as a headache or muscle pains. More severe cases can lead to meningitis, kidney failure and other serious conditions. In rare cases the disease can be fatal.

Should you become unwell with flu-like symptoms, it is essential that you visit your doctor, describe where you have been working and say that you are at risk from leptospirosis.

Personal precautions that should be taken

1. Discourage presence of rats on site i.e. do not leave food lying around and do not throw away food scraps
2. Do not handle the carcasses of dead rats
3. Wear appropriate PPE
4. Prior to entering your work area, wash any cuts, grazes or sores in clean water, applying an antiseptic cleaner to the wound, cover it with gauze and apply a waterproof dressing and PPE as necessary.
5. Avoid rubbing your nose, mouth or eyes with your hands during work
6. Wash your hands, forearms and any other exposed areas of your skin thoroughly at the end of each shift and remove any wet clothing as soon as possible.
7. No smoking, eating or drinking without washing your hands first.

