



## LEPTOSPIROSIS: FACTS FOR MEAT PROCESSING WORKERS

People in the meat processing industry have the highest rate of Leptospirosis infection of all workers in New Zealand. Leptospirosis is an animal disease that can infect humans, also known as a zoonosis. All animals processed for meat in New Zealand — cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and deer — can pass on the Leptospirosis bacteria. Rats can also spread the disease.

### What is Leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is caused by bacteria known as leptospire. These multiply in the kidneys of animals and are shed in the urine. Reproductive tissues can also be infected. Often, an animal carrying Leptospirosis shows no clinical signs.

### How does Leptospirosis affect people?

If you catch Leptospirosis, it may just feel like a bad case of flu, with headaches and fever. Some people become seriously ill and need hospital intensive care and it can cause death. 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, they are unable to go back to running their farm, and the disease keeps coming back. Pregnant women who catch Leptospirosis can miscarry.

### How do you catch Leptospirosis?

Usually when infected animal urine, or water contaminated with urine, gets in your eyes, nose, mouth or through cracks in your skin. Just a splash or spray can spread the disease. Leptospirosis bacteria can survive for days, e.g. in chilled kidneys.

### Who is at risk?

Anyone working in and around the meat plant, including maintenance workers and other visitors, may be at risk. Meat workers are most at risk of catching Leptospirosis when:

- Hosing down the yards or other areas
- Tumbling pig carcasses
- Removing hides or pelt
- Taking out the bladder
- Handling gut contents
- Working with kidneys
- Handling offals for pet food
- Working in the rendering area.



Stock truck drivers have caught the disease. These workers are most exposed to the risk of urine splash all day long:

- Slaughtermen and labourers
- Gutties
- Vets and meat inspectors
- Offal workers and butchers handling kidneys.

### Away from work

People who live on a farm or keep animals have a high rate of infection with Leptospirosis. Even one cow or a few sheep can spread the disease. Rats spread another type of Leptospirosis. Other risks for people living in the country include:

- Hunting
- Gardening in farm soil
- Going barefoot on infected pasture.

What helps the infection to spread?

- Moist, warm conditions
- Cuts, cracks or grazes on the skin
- Soggy skin
- Eating or smoking with unwashed hands
- Uncovered moustache or beard.

## Protecting against Leptospirosis

The aim is to keep urine splashes off your skin and face, and keep your skin dry. Good work practices help to do this:

- Keep knives sharp so they cut better.
- Wear the personal protective gear your employer gives you.

Overalls, aprons, boots and hats are good protection. Anyone whose hands are split or grazed should wear gloves.

- Wash your hands, and dry them using disposable towels — BEFORE eating, smoking, taking a break; AFTER going to the toilet, handling animals.
- Wash your face as well if you have a beard or moustache.
- Put waterproof dressings on any skin cuts and change them regularly.
- Where permitted, wear gloves.
- Change gloves or boots immediately if they split or leak.

## Extra precautions in high-risk areas

Where there is a greater risk of urine splash, such as on the gutty stand, extra protection is needed. This can be:

- Personal protection: something to cover the face.
  - A visor or face shield is better than goggles alone because infection can get in through your nose and mouth as well as eyes.
- Process protection: e.g. pizzle closers, chutes to avoid splashing, Perspex shield to cover the gut contents when they are worked on.

All pig lines should have a Leptospirosis status report updated regularly, so workers know which animals have been vaccinated. At present, workers processing other stock should treat all animals as infected and wear full protection in high-risk areas. In future, tests may be able to identify infected animals at the plant and full protective gear will only be needed to process those animals.

## First aid if you (or someone next to 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 sores and grazes with water. Tell supervisor.
- See a doctor within 24 hours to get a blood sample and get treatment with antibiotics. You need early treatment for best results.
- IMPORTANT: The sample must be taken BEFORE you take any pills.
- Another blood sample will be needed in 3-4 weeks time.

Tell the doctor:

- You work in a meat plant and may have been exposed to Leptospirosis.
- Some meat companies provide a card with information for the doctor.
- If your blood test is positive, ask for an ACC form. Leptospirosis can be an occupational disease, so all costs may be covered by your employer.
- It is also a notifiable disease, so health authorities will visit you.

## Watch your health

If you have caught Leptospirosis, you may not feel ill for a week or two. Go to the doctor if you have:

- 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. Tell the doctor that you work in a meat processing plant and may be at risk of Leptospirosis. Ask for the appropriate tests. The sooner treatment starts, the better.

## Find out more:

You can download a copy of Guidelines for the Control of Occupationally Acquired Leptospirosis and other information from [www.dol.govt.nz](http://www.dol.govt.nz) See also the other bulletins in this series, e.g. for deer, beef, sheep, and wool farmers.

## If you want to know more about Leptospirosis, you can talk to:

### The doctor recommended by your company is:

