



## LEPTOSPIROSIS: FACTS FOR TRANSPORT AND SALEYARD WORKERS

Leptospirosis can be a risk for any people who come in contact with animal urine or water contaminated by animal urine. Leptospirosis is an animal disease that can infect humans, also known as a zoonosis. 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 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 are animals infected with Leptospirosis?

Animals are affected by grazing pasture or drinking water contaminated with the urine of infected animals. The infection enters through the membranes of the eyes, nose and mouth. Leptospirosis spreads easily. An infected animal sheds millions of leptospire in its urine. The bacteria thrive in moist or wet conditions and can survive for months. Any animals sharing pasture can be infected. Introduced animals such as dairy heifers or a new stud bull may bring infection.

### 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. 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 leptospire in its urine. A spray or splash of urine can be infectious.

### 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.

### 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.

### Who else is at risk of infection?

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.

All business owners have a responsibility under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 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.
- First aid advice and a kit.

### How do you control Leptospirosis?

Animals can be vaccinated against Leptospirosis. The vaccination programme must be long-term and cover all animals on the farm, but other on-farm controls are needed as well. There is no vaccine available against the type of Leptospirosis (*ballum*) which is carried by rats. The Department of Labour 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.

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.

### How can you protect against infection?

Good personal hygiene is your best protection against Leptospirosis. Anyone whose hands are split or grazed should wear gloves when working closely with animals. Skin cuts should be covered with waterproof dressing, and regularly changed.

- Look out for and avoid situations where you might be splashed with urine or with water contaminated urine.
- Use low-pressure hoses for cleaning, and direct them away from people.
- Use personal protective equipment (PPE) e.g.
  - Overalls, gloves, waterproof footwear.
  - Goggles, or ideally a face mask, if working with very unsettled animals.
- Wash hands regularly, and dry them using disposable towels.
- Always clean hands before eating or smoking. Wash your face as well if you have a beard or moustache.
- Change gloves or boots immediately if they split or leak.

If your protective equipment 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. Anyone whose hands are split or grazed should wear gloves.

Have clean toilet and hand-washing facilities, with running water and disposable towels.

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

- Wash face well and flush out mouth and eyes with lots of running water.
- “Bleed” cuts, flush fresh or old cuts and grazes with water.
- See a doctor within 24 hours to get a blood sample and get treatment with antibiotics.
- IMPORTANT: The sample must be taken BEFORE you take any medication.
- Another sample will be needed in about 3 weeks’ time. Tell the doctor that you work with animals and may have been exposed to Leptospirosis.

### Watch your health

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. Remind your doctor that you work with cattle and that Leptospirosis may be a cause of your symptoms. 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, and meat processing workers.

