



FAQ for Hurricane Katrina and Leptospirosis

What is leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is an infection of both humans and animals. It is caused by bacteria called *Leptospira*. In humans it causes a wide range of symptoms. Some infected persons may have no symptoms. Others may have high fever, severe headache, and muscle aches. In severe cases, people may have jaundice (yellow skin and eyes) from liver failure. Severe disease may also cause kidney damage and respiratory distress. In rare cases death occurs.

Many of these symptoms can be mistaken for other diseases. Leptospirosis is confirmed by testing of a blood or urine sample.

How do people get leptospirosis?

People get leptospirosis from exposure to infected animals. They can also be infected when exposed to water contaminated with the urine of infected animals.

Many different kinds of animals carry *Leptospira*. Animals may carry the bacterium but have no symptoms. *Leptospira* have been found in cattle, pigs, horses, dogs, rodents, and wild animals. The disease is not spread from person to person.

In Louisiana, leptospirosis occurs in cattle, skunks, and nutria (large rodents). Urban leptospirosis caused by exposure to rats occurs in the U.S.

How long is it between the time of exposure and when people become sick?

People may develop symptoms from 2 days to 4 weeks after exposure. Illness usually begins abruptly with fever. Leptospirosis may occur in two phases. In the first phase, fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, vomiting, and diarrhea, are common. The patient may get better for a time but become ill again. If a second phase occurs, it is usually more severe. Severely ill person may develop kidney or liver failure.

The illness lasts from a few days to 3 weeks or longer. Without treatment, recovery may take several months.

Where is leptospirosis found?

Leptospirosis occurs worldwide but is most common in tropical climates. Many people who work outdoors or with animals may be at risk. People exposed to urine-contaminated water during work or recreation may also be at risk.

Between 1965 and 1993, the incidence rate of leptospirosis in Louisiana ranged from 1 to 14 per 100,000 people per year.

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How is leptospirosis treated?

Leptospirosis is treated with antibiotics. Doxycycline or penicillin are usually used. Treatment is most effective when given early in the course of disease. Intravenous antibiotics may be used for severe disease. Persons with symptoms suggestive of leptospirosis should contact a health care provider.

Can leptospirosis be prevented?

The risk of getting leptospirosis can be reduced by avoiding contact with urine-contaminated water. Protective clothing and footwear should be worn if exposure to urine-contaminated water is unavoidable.

What is the risk of leptospirosis along the Gulf Coast after hurricane Katrina?

Outbreaks of leptospirosis have occurred following flood events. Leptospirosis cases may occur in the days to weeks following Hurricane Katrina.

Persons exposed to flood waters from Hurricane Katrina who develop fever should see a healthcare provider.

For more information on leptospirosis, please see:

- [Leptospirosis Resources](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/leptospirosis_g.htm) (http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/leptospirosis_g.htm)

For more information, visit www.bt.cdc.gov/disasters,
or call CDC at 800-CDC-INFO (English and Spanish) or 888-232-6348 (TTY).

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