

Leptospirosis



If you are the outdoor type and like to do hiking or camping or water sports, you can also come into contact with *Leptospira* contaminated water and soil.

READ that some National Service camps might have been contaminated with leptospirosis. I have never heard of this disease before. What is it?

Leptospirosis has many names. Perhaps you may have heard of them – haemorrhagic jaundice, canicola fever, infectious jaundice, mud fever, spirochetal jaundice, swamp fever, swineherd's disease, caver's flu, or sewerman's flu.

It's caused by a bacterial called *Leptospira interrogans*. This bacteria has the form of a spirochete.

I heard that this disease is transmitted by rats.

Leptospirosis is not only transmitted by rats, but also many other animals, like skunks, opossums, raccoons, foxes, and other vermin. Naturally, in Malaysia, it is transmitted mostly by rats.

When soil or water is contaminated by the urine or faeces of an infected animal such as a rat, you can get leptospirosis by consuming the contaminated water or food. In addition, if the contaminated water or soil gets into your eyes, nose, mouth, sinuses or an open wound,

Tell Me About ...

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skin, especially on the front of your legs. You feel quite ill.

Rarely, you may feel depressed or confused. There are even some reported cases of aggression, hallucination, and violence!

After three to five days, you temporarily recover.

Second stage

In many mild cases, this second stage doesn't even happen at all. When the infection is more severe, you enter this second phase. All your initial symptoms like fever returns. This time you have chest and abdominal pain. Your organs get affected by the bacteria.

Your kidneys may be affected, as well as your liver. You may have meningitis. You may have a sore throat and dry cough.

With treatment, mild cases will recover within a few weeks. But in severe cases, you

you are also prey to leptospirosis.

Wait, does it mean it's unsafe to consume raw foods like sashimi and salads for fear that they might be contaminated?

Most of the time, if your food has been washed and cooked properly, there should be no risk of contamination. Cooked food and boiled water are free from the *Leptospira* bacteria.

However, if you like raw foods, there is always a risk that the water used to wash them might have been contaminated.

To ensure your floors or tables aren't contaminated, you just have to use detergent, disinfectant or soap.

If I have pets like dogs, cats, hamsters or guinea pigs, does it mean I am more at risk?

If your pet is infected, yes. However, if your pet was sick with leptospirosis, you would have taken it to the vet anyway, and your pet will be treated for the disease. The bacteria is not airborne, so you cannot get it that way from your pet.

Vets, pet shop owners, sewage workers, and farmers are most at risk because they are in contact with animals all the time. If you are the outdoor type and like to do hiking or camping or water sports, you can also come into contact with contaminated water and soil.

How do I know if I have leptospirosis?

The disease usually begins any time three days after exposure. There are several stages:

First stage

It usually starts suddenly. You will experience a severe headache. You may have eye redness, muscle pains in your back and calves, fatigue, and nausea. You have a fever of over 39°C. You may have a pinprick rash on your

may have kidney or liver failure within 10 days, leading to jaundice and maybe death. You may also have heart failure. There may be significant bleeding from your mouth, eyes, nose and gut.

Cases with jaundice are called Weil's Disease.

I am now very worried. I have a pond at the bottom of my garden. My children love to play in it. Should I stop them?

Any water treated with chlorine or UV sterilisation is very safe. So if you have a pond or body of water, you can make sure it is chlorinated.

You should not drink from a body of water such as a pond or lake for no reason if you are not sure of the water.

Can leptospirosis be treated?

As with any bacteria, yes. Antibiotics like doxycycline and the penicillin group are effective against the *Leptospira* bacteria. Naturally, if you are ill, you need hospitalisation and monitoring to see if any of your organs are affected. If you have severe kidney failure, naturally you need dialysis.

A vaccine for leptospirosis is available, and is given once a year.

■ *Dr YLM graduated as a medical doctor, and has been writing for many years on various subjects such as medicine, health advice, computers and entertainment. The information contained in this column is for general educational purposes only. Neither The Star nor the author gives any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to such information. The Star and the author disclaim all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.*