

Rats pose serious problem

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Growing population reflected by spike in leptospirosis cases

PETALING JAYA: The population of rats in the country has grown into a serious problem for cities and residential areas, as reflected by the alarming rise in cases of leptospirosis, commonly known as "rat urine disease".

The highly infectious bacterial disease spreads via the urine of infected rats and causes death in severe cases.

The Health Ministry's disease control division recorded 3,665 leptospirosis cases last year, a whopping 85.5% increase from the 1,976 cases recorded in 2010, with 69 deaths. In 2011, there were 2,268 cases with 55 deaths.

Despite the sharp rise in cases, the death rate continued to decline in 2012 with 48 deaths recorded.

The Health Ministry's disease control division's director Dr Chong Chee Kheong said the number of cases detected and reduced death rate also reflects the degree of awareness among the public and medical fraternity about the disease.

"Public areas must be kept hygienic at all times. Drains must not be clogged and rubbish must be disposed of properly.

"Civic-mindedness is also needed from the community. People cannot keep expecting the authorities to clean up after them," he said.

He said the most common way of contracting the food and water-borne disease, was through ingestion although it could also be spread through open wounds.

Dr Chong said markets and hawkers centres would attract rats if rubbish is not disposed properly.

As for camping sites and recreational areas, he said the urine and faeces of rats would get washed into ponds, lakes, and waterfalls when it rained.

He also warned that drinking directly from cans could also infect people, as there could be dried rat urine on the top of canned drinks. He advised people to rinse the cans with water first.

Dr Chong stressed that food han-

SYMPTOMS & COMPLICATIONS

- > Intense headache
- > Fever
- > Muscle ache, especially the calf muscles and lumbar region
- > Pain in the joints
- > Redness in the eyes
- > Neck stiffness
- > Liver damage
- > Bleeding in the intestines and lungs
- > Irregular heart beat or heart failure
- > Kidney failure
- > Skin rash
- > Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and diarrhoea

TREATMENT

- > Two main components: Suppressing the causative agent and fighting possible complications.
- > Antibiotics or penicillin may be administered.
- > Glucose and salt solution infusions may also be administered; with dialysis used in serious cases.
- > Organ specific care is essential in cases of renal, liver or heart involvement.

Sources: Ministry of Health Malaysia and Wikipedia

What is leptospirosis?

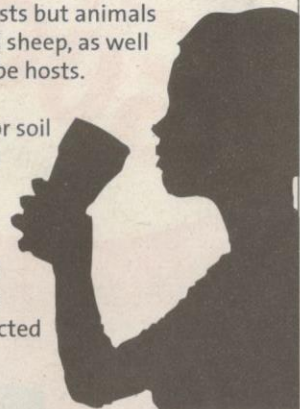
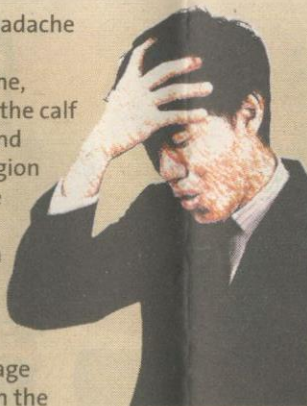
- > It is a potentially deadly bacterial infection.
- > Rats, mice and moles are primary hosts but animals such as dogs, deer, rabbits, cows and sheep, as well as some marine mammals can also be hosts.
- > People can get infected through:
 - (a) skin contact with water, food or soil containing the urine of infected animals,
 - (b) from swallowing contaminated food or water;
 - (c) the splashing of contaminated water into the eyes or nose, and
 - (d) exposing open wounds to infected water.
- > There are no records of human-to-human transmission.

WHO'S AT RISK?

- > Several sections of the population are more susceptible, such as veterinarians, slaughterhouse workers, farmers, sewer maintenance workmen, waste disposal facility staff and land surveyors.

MINIMISING YOUR RISK

- > Rinse the top of soft-drink cans with water before consuming the contents; use a straw or pour into a glass/cup if possible.
- > Make it a habit to rinse cutlery, crockery and drinking cups before use.
- > Avoid unhygienic eateries, especially if the place has a rodent infestation.
- > Make hygiene a priority when picnicking.
- > Always wash up after engaging in outdoor activities.
- > Clean up after yourself when visiting recreational spaces and public parks to reduce the spread of disease-carrying rodents.



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“Early detection is vital in preventing this curable disease,” he told *The Star* yesterday.

He attributed the sudden spike in cases to the Government’s decision to make it mandatory for private hospitals to report cases of the disease.

Leptospirosis was classified as a notifiable disease on Dec 9, 2010, under the Prevention and Control of Infectious Diseases Act 1988.

Dr Chong said unhygienic surroundings might contributed to the increase in cases.

He urged the authorities and the people to work together to create clean public environments to prevent the growing numbers of disease-carrying vermin.

dollers must be hygienic, have their vaccine shots updated and ensure proper food preparation and waste disposal.

Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Abdul Rahman Dahlan said he was appalled by the rampant rise in the numbers of rats in towns and cities.

He said he would raise the matter of cleanliness in public areas with waste management companies like Alam Flora, SWM Environment and E-Idaman.

Abdul Rahman said illegal hawkers and food stall owners who left waste irresponsibly by the roadside were the biggest problem and urged local authorities to take firm

action against them.

He said while the ministry would work closely with the local councils to make the cities more liveable, the task of cleaning up towns and cities should include the public.

“Civic consciousness is still lacking, with cleanliness in public areas leaving much to be desired despite Malaysia having some of the best infrastructure.

“But there are sparks of hope. School children have been very receptive to our programmes on recycling and maintaining cleanliness.

“Hopefully, they will grow up into becoming a civic conscious generation,” he added.

Unhygienic conditions leading to more rats

JOHOR BARU: Rat infestations are growing. Last year, the city council here (MBJB) killed 2,715 rats in total; it destroyed 2,100 the previous year.

These rodents were caught at dirty food premises.

MBJB public relations officer Aziz Ithnin said the council’s Vector Disease Carrier Control Unit regularly conducts such operations, especially at areas with large infestations.

“We conduct stringent checks at eateries and hotels here to ensure that they follow the rules and regulations on cleanliness,” he said.

The MBJB comes down hard on any food operators who fail to adhere to the rules.

“We have cleanliness courses for food operators and they have no excuse not to be hygienic,” Aziz said.

Last year, it inspected 1,150 food outlets and these were graded from an “A” to a “D” for cleanliness. More than 110 got an “A” while one received a “D”.

Food outlets that fail the inspection are ordered to close down.

“The MBJB also carries out similar programmes, including *gotongroyong* activities in housing areas, to inform the public on the importance of keeping their areas clean because rodents could bring fatal

We conduct stringent checks at eateries and hotels here.

— AZIZ ITHNIN

diseases to humans,” he said.

In Petaling Jaya, rats are a serious problem at wet markets and food courts.

More than 100 rats in total are trapped every month on average, according to Petaling Jaya City Council (MBPJ) public relations officer Zainun Zakaria. But last January, 251 rodents were caught and in February it was 260.

Complaints about the increasing presence of rodents at these places are on the rise too, according to the MBPJ.

“Most of the drains are choked with food waste and other indiscriminately dumped items,” Zainun said.

“The rodents are attracted to the unhygienic conditions.”

“We are doing our best and those operating food stalls must also do their part to ensure clean surroundings,” she added.

Family now cautious about where they eat

PETALING JAYA: Script-writer Martias Ali is more cautious about taking his family out to their favourite eateries these days after his 15-year-old son was stricken with leptospirosis.

His eldest son Adza Danial Haiqal (*pic*) had a fever for two days about a fortnight ago.

When the fever did not subside on the third day, Martias took him to a hospital.

“After a blood test was done on him, the hospital said my son had dengue fever and treated him as an outpatient. They told me to give him plenty of water and to bring



him again the next day for another blood test.

“So I went again the next day for the blood test. But it was only on the third day that they told me they found traces of leptospirosis virus and ruled out dengue fever.”

Adza was admitted last Wednesday.

“His blood platelet count was okay but his white blood cells had dropped.

“Thank God they diagnosed him early and was given proper treatment,” said Martias, 45.

Adza was discharged on Sunday. “I have never seen my son in

such a bad shape.

“The virus attacked his joints and he could hardly walk. It was two weeks of agony.

“Although I’ve heard of leptospirosis but the fact that my son contracted this disease really took me by surprise.”

“I’m so thankful that Adza has recovered but the doctor said his liver had deformed as a result of the virus,” said Martias, who is still in the dark as to how his son had contracted leptospirosis.

However, the father of four admits that his family likes to eat out.

“Most stalls are not hygienic. Our drains are full of rats as big as cats,” said Martias.