

Tularemia: Questions and answers

What is tularemia?

Tularemia, also known as “rabbit fever” is a disease caused by bacteria called *Francisella tularensis*.

Tularemia is typically found in animals, especially rodents, rabbits, and hares.

How do people become infected with tularemia?

Typically, people become infected through the bite of infected insects (usually ticks and deerflies), by handling infected sick or dead animals, by eating or drinking contaminated food or water, or inhaling bacteria that are in the air.

Does tularemia occur naturally in the United States?

Yes. Tularemia is a widespread disease in animals. About 200 human cases are reported each year in the United States. Tularemia has been reported in all states except Hawaii. Most cases occur in the south-central and western states. Nearly all cases occur in rural areas, and are caused by the bites of ticks and biting flies or from handling rodents, rabbits, or hares that have the infection. Cases also resulted from inhaling tularemia bacteria in the air and from laboratory accidents.

What are the symptoms of tularemia?

The symptoms people develop depend on how they are exposed to tularemia.

Symptoms could include skin ulcers, swollen and painful lymph glands, inflamed eyes, sore throat, mouth sores, diarrhea or pneumonia. If the bacteria are inhaled, symptoms can include abrupt onset of fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, joint pain, dry cough, and progressive weakness. People with pneumonia can develop chest pain, difficulty breathing, bloody sputum, and respiratory failure. Tularemia can be fatal if the person is not treated with appropriate antibiotics.

Can I become infected with the tularemia bacteria from another person?

People do not transmit the infection to others, so infected persons do not need to be isolated.

How soon would I get sick if I were exposed to tularemia bacteria?

The incubation period (the time from being exposed to becoming ill) for tularemia is typically 3 to 5 days, but can range from 1 to 14 days.

What should I do if I think I may have come in contact with tularemia bacteria?

If you think you were exposed to tularemia bacteria, see a doctor quickly.

Your doctor may take samples to send to a laboratory for tests.

Treatment with antibiotics for a period of 10-14 days or more after exposure may be recommended. If you are given antibiotics, it is important to take them according to the instructions you receive, and to take all the medication you are given.

Your doctor will notify local and state health departments immediately so an investigation and infection control activities can begin.

Can tularemia be effectively treated with antibiotics?

Yes. Early treatment is important to prevent serious illness. Several types of antibiotics have been effective in treating tularemia infections. Health officials will test the bacteria to determine which antibiotics will be most effective.

How long can tularemia exist in the environment?

The tularemia bacteria can remain alive for weeks in water and soil.

Is there a vaccine available for tularemia?

A vaccine for tularemia was used in the past to protect laboratory workers, but it is not currently available.

Contact:

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment
(303) 692-2700 - www.cdphe.state.co.us

Garfield County Public Health
195 W. 14th Street – Rifle, CO 81650
(970) 625-5200 – garfield-county.com/public-health