

Tularemia

What is tularemia?

Tularemia is a disease caused by a bacterium. Tularemia can occur naturally in many parts of the United States, but is more common in rural areas and is a widespread disease in animals. Also known as “rabbit fever,” tularemia is most often found in rabbits, rodents, and hares, and can be carried by ticks, deer flies, horse flies, and mosquitoes.

Tularemia facts

People can be exposed to tularemia through the bite of an infected tick or deerfly, or if they have an open cut that comes in contact with blood or tissue from an infected animal. People can also be at risk if they breathe in dust stirred up during mowing or moving hay, grass, grain, or soil contaminated by an infected animal. Tularemia can also be contracted by eating undercooked meat of infected animals or drinking contaminated water. Tularemia cannot be spread from person to person.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually appear 3 to 5 days after exposure to the bacteria, but can take as long as 14 days. Symptoms include:

- Sudden fever, chills, headaches, diarrhea, muscle aches, joint pain, dry cough, and progressive weakness
- Pneumonia, chest pain, and difficulty breathing
- Depending on how a person was exposed to the bacteria, other symptoms can include ulcers on the skin or mouth, swollen and painful lymph glands, swollen and painful eyes, or a sore throat

People can die from this disease if it is not diagnosed early enough and treated with antibiotics.

Prevention

- Avoid contact with wild rodents, rabbits, and hares.
- Do not touch sick or dead animals.
- Remove any dead animals from your property by using a shovel or gloves to place the animal in double bags and then in a covered outdoor trash container for disposal. Afterwards, wash hands well with soap and running water and disinfect tools with a 10% bleach solution for 10 minutes.
- Use impervious gloves when skinning or handling dead animals, especially rabbits.
- Prevent insect bites: use insect repellent containing DEET on your skin, or treat clothing with insect repellent.
- Wear a dust mask over your nose and mouth during any activities that may stir up contaminated dust, such as mowing in areas where rodents and rabbits might live.
- Be sure that food (especially game animals) is cooked thoroughly and that your water is from a safe source.

Treatment

Tularemia is treated with antibiotics. Antibiotics are most effective when the illness is diagnosed early. If you experience flu-like symptoms combined with a swollen lymph node, and have been exposed to a sick or dead animal or have been bitten by ticks or deerflies, see your healthcare provider immediately. Currently, there is no vaccine available for tularemia.



Hand washing steps:

1. Use soap and warm running water.
2. Scrub hands for at least 20 seconds; use a nail brush.
3. Wash all surfaces:
 - Between fingers
 - Under fingernails
 - Back of hands
 - Wrists
4. Rinse well and dry hands with a clean paper towel.