Tularemia- Factsheet

What is tularemia?

Francisella tularensis, the bacterium that causes tularemia, is found in the environment, wild animals (e.g., rabbits and rodents), arthropods (e.g., ticks and deer flies), and in soil and water contaminated by infected animals. Tularemia is a bacterial disease that can cause a variety of symptoms, depending on how the bacteria enter the body.

What are the symptoms of tularemia?

Symptoms usually appear 3 to 5 days after exposure, with a range of 1 to 21 days. Initial symptoms may include sudden onset of fever, chills, headache, dry cough, muscle aches, joint pain and weakness. How the bacteria get into a person to infect him/her impacts what other symptoms that person might develop. Tularemia may cause skin ulcers, swollen and painful lymph glands, inflamed eyes, sore throat, oral ulcers or pneumonia-like illness. Pneumonia may be a serious side effect of all types of infection and requires quick diagnosis and specific treatment to prevent death.

How is tularemia spread?

The disease may be spread in several ways. Hunters may be exposed to the bacteria while skinning or dressing wild animals, especially rabbits or hares. A person could also become infected if s/he handled pelts or ate uncooked meat from infected animals. Certain infected arthropods (e.g., ticks and deer flies) may also spread the bacteria when they bite. It is also possible to become infected after drinking contaminated water. Breathing in infected aerosols, such as dust from contaminated soil, hay or grain, or after mowing over animal carcasses, is a rarer way tularemia could be spread.

How long are people contagious?

People are not contagious; a person with tularemia cannot spread it to another person.

Who gets tularemia?

Any person can get tularemia. This includes people from all parts of New Mexico.

What treatment is available for people with tularemia?

Early treatment with antibiotics is recommended. Tularemia can present very similarly to other diseases, including plague, so seeking prompt medical attention is necessary to determine what is causing illness.

Do infected people need to be kept home from school, work or daycare?

No. Persons with tularemia cannot spread it to other people.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting tularemia?

- Take steps to avoid being bitten by insects such as ticks and deer flies (arthropods). Wear insect repellent and long sleeves and pants while outside in areas where there are lots of bugs.

- Control ticks on pets and prevent pets from roaming.
- Never drink untreated water from lakes and streams.
- Teach children not to touch wild rabbits or other potentially infected animals.
- Wear rubber gloves when skinning or handling animals, especially rabbits. Wash your hands after.
- Cook the meat of wild rabbits and rodents thoroughly before eating it.
- Check yard for dead animals before landscaping and farming and avoid mowing directly over carcasses.

What about my pet?

Your pet may also get tularemia in similar ways as humans. Immediately take your pet to the veterinarian if it develops signs of fever, tiredness and loss of appetite, especially after hunting. Pets with tularemia are not likely to spread it to their owners. Keeping your pet on appropriate flea and tick medication is the best form of prevention.