

Q FEVER

FACT SHEET

WHAT IS Q FEVER?

Q Fever is a disease caused by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*. It is spread to humans from cattle, sheep and goats and a range of other domestic and wild animals. Even people who do not have contact with animals may be infected.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Many infected people have no or few symptoms. People who do become sick often develop symptoms 2-3 weeks after coming into contact with the bacteria and frequently have a severe flu-like illness:

- high fevers and chills
- severe 'drenching' sweats
- severe headaches, often behind the eyes
- muscle and joint pains
- extreme fatigue (tiredness)



People infected with Q Fever may also develop hepatitis (inflammation of the liver) or pneumonia (infection of the lungs). Without treatment, symptoms can last from two to six weeks. Most people make a full recovery and become immune. Occasionally, people develop chronic infections up to two years later which can cause a range of health issues including heart problems. About 10% of people who are sick with acute Q fever go on to suffer from a chronic fatigue like illness which can be debilitating for years

HOW IS Q FEVER SPREAD?

People usually get infected by breathing in air or dust that has been contaminated by Q Fever bacteria from birth fluids, urine, faeces, blood or milk of infected animals. Cattle, sheep and goats are the main sources of infection, however a wide range of animals including domestic and feral dogs and cats, feral pigs, horses, rabbits, rodents, alpacas, camels, llamas, foxes, and Australian native wildlife can also spread the bacteria to humans.

The bacteria can survive in the soil and dust for many years and can be spread over several kilometres by the wind.

HOW DO I KNOW IF MY ANIMALS ARE INFECTED?

Infected animals usually do not appear to be sick. A sharp increase in the number of miscarriages or stillbirths in your animals may be a sign that Q Fever is on your farm. Contact your vet if your flock or herd is experiencing fertility problems.

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WHO IS AT RISK?

Those working directly with animals and /or animal products are most at risk. This includes:

- abattoir and meat workers
- livestock and dairy farmers and farm workers
- shearers, wool classers/sorters, pelt feed and hide processors
- stockyard/feedlot workers and transporters of animals, animal products and waste
- veterinarians, veterinary nurses/assistants/students, laboratory workers and others working with veterinary specimens
- family members of those in high-risk occupations (from contaminated clothes, boots or equipment)
- people living on or near a high-risk industry
- wildlife workers working with high-risk animals (including Australian native wildlife)

Persons who enter spaces in which Q Fever may be present are also at risk.

HOW IS Q FEVER PREVENTED?

The Q Fever vaccine is the most effective way to prevent infection, and is recommended for anyone working or living on a farm or in a high-risk occupation aged 15 years and older.

Other ways to reduce Q Fever infection, especially if you are not immune or vaccinated:

- avoid high risk activities such as birthing, butchering or slaughtering cattle, sheep or goats
- wear personal protective clothing and a properly fitted P2 mask when working with/disposing animal products.
- wash hands and arms with soapy water after handling animal products and potentially contaminated materials

To protect your household, avoid taking dirty clothing, coveralls, boots or equipment home from the farm where possible. If you do take clothing home, bag and wash it separately (wear a mask when handling).

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I GET Q FEVER?

A Q Fever diagnosis may be initially suspected by symptoms and if there is a risk of having been in contact with the bacteria in the previous six weeks. Inform your doctor if you belong to a high-risk group above. You will be treated with antibiotics and follow-up appointments are required.

Blood tests two to three weeks after symptoms begin will be completed to confirm the diagnosis.

The Gippsland Region Public Health Unit will be notified of any confirmed Q fever cases in Gippsland and will investigate each case to determine the likely source of infection, identify others at risk and ensure control measures are in place, as well as ensure those infected are provided with information and linked to appropriate care.



For more information about Q Fever please scan the QR Code