

Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is an animal infection. After recovery the animal excretes the organisms in its urine. The bacteria survive for days even weeks in moist conditions but only for a few hours in salt water. The infection is caught by direct contact with infected urine or a polluted water environment. Bacteria can enter through skin abrasions or via eyes, nose or mouth.

The Illness

The usual incubation is 2 to 12 days. Usually a "flu" like illness occurs which resolves in 2-3 weeks. There may be fever, severe headache, pains in the back and calves, and prostration. A few cases develop jaundice, when the condition is known as Weil's Disease.

Although death may occur in about 15% of jaundiced patients, death without jaundice is virtually unknown. Antibiotics during the first few days help in limiting infection. Many cases recover without specific treatment.

What to do

If you think you may have an infection, go to your doctor and tell him/her that there may be a risk of leptospirosis. The diagnosis is by clinical suspicion. Blood tests can rarely confirm the illness in time to affect treatment. They may subsequently confirm it.

Prevention

- Cover all cuts and abrasions with waterproof plasters.
- Always wear footwear to avoid cutting feet.
- Avoid capsizing or rolling in suspect waters.
- Where possible, shower soon after canoeing.
- If in doubt, contact your doctor early.

Leptospirosis is rare, and its deterioration into Weil's Disease even more rare. Weil's Disease is, however, a very serious illness, and must be swiftly diagnosed and treated.

The Department of Public Health, Dr. Steeven's Hospital, Dublin 8. (Tel. 01 6790700) issued a Public Health Warning in August 1996 for circulation to all clubs involved in water based activities. The details circulated are similar to the above and are available from the Department.

First issued by the Irish Canoe Union

January 1998

Re - issued

November 2001

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