

UNISON HEALTH & SAFETY
Information
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• *Leptospirosis (Weil's Disease)*

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Leptospirosis is an infection spread from contact with animal urine. There are several types. The most common is transmitted through contact with rat's urine and can lead to Weil's disease, a serious and sometimes fatal illness. Leptospirosis from dogs is now very rare in the UK, and infection from cattle mainly affects farmers, although cases have been reported in meat inspectors.

Leptospirosis is most common in tropical and subtropical climates. Between 2000 and 2008 there have been an average of 50-80 cases in the UK per year. In 2008 there were 62 cases in England and Wales, 13 in Scotland and 1 in Northern Ireland. (Source: Health Protection Agency.)

The main UNISON members at risk are canal and river workers, and sewage workers. Youth workers involved in outdoor water activities can also be at risk.

The organism usually enters the body through cuts in the skin and has an incubation period of 7-10 days. The disease starts off as a flu-like illness and headache, but severe Leptospirosis, or Weil's disease, can lead to jaundice, anaemia, haemorrhages, renal damage and circulatory collapse. It is treatable by antibiotics, however this is most effective during the early stages.

It is therefore important that everyone who may be at risk of Weil's disease both let their doctor know, and also carry a card, which should be provided by their employer. This card is available from the Health and Safety Executive.

However the best way to deal with Leptospirosis is to prevent it. Employers whose staff might be at risk must undertake a risk assessment. One of the most effective measures is an active policy of rodent control. However in addition to that, all staff who work with sewage or near stagnant or slow moving water should be provided with protective clothing and laundry provisions. Employers need to ensure that anyone working in an area where there is a risk of Leptospirosis should make sure any cuts or broken skin are covered with waterproof plasters. They should also ensure there is an adequate supply of fresh hand-washing facilities.

Branches should also make sure that any workers who may be at risk are provided with training, from their employer, on both how to recognise the disease and prevent it.