



August 2011

Community and Health Services Department



Q Fever

What is Q Fever?

Q fever is a disease that occurs in animals and can be transmitted to humans. It is caused by the bacteria *Coxiella burnetii*, which are found all over the world.

Most people recover from this disease, although one to two percent of people who develop acute Q fever may die. The exception to this is in cases where swelling around the lining of the heart develops. Death may result in 30 to 60 percent of patients who develop this complication.

Those who recover from Q fever may have lifelong immunity against it.

What are the symptoms of Q fever?

Only about half of all people infected will show signs of illness, which can include sudden onset of fever, chills, weakness, headache, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Enlargement of the liver and spleen, and swelling of the lining of the heart may also develop. A rash is unusual. Symptoms usually appear two to three weeks after having being exposed to the bacteria. The illness lasts for one to four weeks and then resolves gradually.

How does Q fever spread?

Q fever spreads very easily to humans from infected animals. People who work around animals or animal tissue, such as farmers, slaughterhouse workers and laboratory personnel, are at greatest risk.

Sheep, cattle, goats, cats, ticks and some wild animals can carry the Q fever organism. Infected animals usually do not show signs of illness, but shed massive numbers of organisms in the placenta during birthing.

Very few organisms are required to cause infection. Infection occurs most often by breathing in aerosols contaminated with the organism. Infection may also result from direct contact with infected animals and other contaminated materials such as animal feces, wool, straw, fertilizer and laundry. Raw milk from infected cows has been responsible in some cases. Direct person-to-person occurs rarely, but may occur in cases of pneumonia.

Information sheet

For further information, please call:

York Region Health Connection 1-800-361-5653

TTY 1-866-252-9933 or visit www.york.ca

How do you prevent Q fever?

- If you are at risk of being exposed to these bacteria, ask your physician about getting vaccinated.
- When working in a setting where you might be exposed to the bacteria, wear protective clothing. In a lab setting, this includes laboratory coats, gloves, gown (tight wrists and fastened in back) and masks. Use appropriate procedures for bagging, autoclaving and washing of laboratory clothing.
- If present where an animal is birthing, properly dispose of the placenta, birth products, fetal membranes and aborted fetuses. This is important in case the animal is carrying the Q fever organism, to prevent the spread of the bacteria.
- Restrict access to barns and laboratories where potentially infected animals are kept.
- Avoid unpasteurized milk and milk products.

What is the treatment for Q Fever?

Antibiotic treatment is available for Q Fever and must be prescribed by a physician.

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