

FACT SHEET

Q FEVER



WHAT IS Q FEVER?

Q fever is a flu-like disease carried by cattle, sheep and goats. It is also carried by feral animals such as bandicoots and rodents.

The bacterium, *Coxiella burnetii*, rarely causes clinical disease in livestock.

However, Q fever can be transmitted to humans and is a notifiable disease in Victoria.

WHO IS AT RISK?

People who work with livestock have the greatest risk of contracting the disease, including:

- ▶ farmers, farm employees and contractors
- ▶ abattoir workers and meat inspectors
- ▶ veterinarians
- ▶ shearers
- ▶ livestock carriers and animal handlers.

HOW IS IT SPREAD?

The bacterium is shed in the milk, faeces and urine of infected animals. The most potent source of the disease is in the foetus, placenta and birth fluids. Q fever can persist in dry conditions, surviving in dust particles and dry faeces for months.

Humans can become infected with Q fever by:

- ▶ ingestion or inhalation of contaminated dust particles
- ▶ handling infected tissues and fluids especially afterbirth
- ▶ contact with infected animal waste products
- ▶ contact with soiled straw, wool or hair
- ▶ consuming unpasteurised milk.

CLINICAL SIGNS

Clinical signs are rarely observed in livestock. In some cases abortions in sheep and goats occur as a result of Q fever.

Humans infected with the disease generally exhibit flu-like symptoms such as:

- ▶ fever, which can last for extended periods of time
- ▶ chills, usually lasting three to four days
- ▶ severe headaches, muscle and joint pain
- ▶ nausea, vomiting and diarrhoea
- ▶ an aversion to light
- ▶ overwhelming fatigue
- ▶ weight loss
- ▶ endocarditis, inflammation of the heart valve, as a result of acute infection. This usually occurs in people with a pre-existing heart condition.

Most Q fever infection is self-limiting and lasts about two to six weeks. However in some cases the disease can be quite severe requiring hospitalisation or lead to chronic disease where symptoms persist for years, affecting an individual's ability to work or undertake everyday tasks. Chronic Q fever symptoms include:

- ▶ fatigue
- ▶ muscle pain
- ▶ intense headaches
- ▶ fever
- ▶ depression.

TREATMENT

Treatment and control strategies for livestock are rarely required, except in some goat herds.

Q fever in humans is diagnosed by a blood test and treatment with antibiotics is most effective when started early in the course of the disease. Severe Q fever symptoms, such as endocarditis, will require ongoing medical care.

Seek medical advice if you have flu-like symptoms and may have been in contact with infected stock. When seeking medical attention, clearly state that you may have been in contact with livestock infected with Q fever. The disease is often misdiagnosed due to the similarity of symptoms with other illnesses.

CAN YOU DEVELOP IMMUNITY?

Immunity against Q fever can be achieved if you have:

- ▶ received the Q fever vaccination
- ▶ previously been infected with Q fever, as confirmed by a doctor.

The Q fever vaccine is recommended for people working in the livestock industry.

Before vaccination, you need to have a skin and blood test to determine if you have previously been infected with Q fever.

If you have previously been infected with the disease, it is important you don't get vaccinated. You may have been unknowingly infected with a mild strain, not confirmed by a doctor as Q fever.

To arrange for a Q fever vaccination contact your doctor or the Australian Q Fever Register at www.qfever.org or 1300 733 837.

TAKE HOME MESSAGES:

- ▶ Q fever is transmitted from animals to humans and the common source of infection are cattle, sheep and goats.
- ▶ The bacterium is shed in milk, faeces and urine, foetus, placenta and birth fluids of infected animals.
- ▶ Humans infected with the disease generally exhibit flu-like symptoms.
- ▶ Vaccination is highly recommended for people working in the livestock industry.

PREVENTION

Hygienic practices should always be part of on-farm safety precautions. However, people who work with animals should carry out stringent hygienic practices, such as:

- ▶ Thoroughly washing hands and arms after handling animals, carcasses, birth material and contaminated feedstuff.
- ▶ Using protection against inhalation of infective dust particles and covering any cuts or abrasions to prevent infectious fluids entering the body.
- ▶ Burning or burying infected animal birth material.
- ▶ Boiling milk before consumption.
- ▶ Getting vaccinated against Q fever.

For further information, please contact Livestock Health & Biosecurity on 1300 882 833 or lhbv@vff.org.au

FURTHER LINKS

[Australian Q Fever Register
www.qfever.org](http://www.qfever.org)

[Seqirus™: Q fever, are you at risk?
www.qfeverfacts.com.au](http://www.qfeverfacts.com.au)

[Department of Health & Human Services Victoria: Q fever
www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/disease-information-advice/q-fever](http://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/infectious-diseases/disease-information-advice/q-fever)

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