



Q fever

- **Q fever is a disease caused by infection with the *Coxiella burnetii* bacteria.**
- **It mainly affects people who work with livestock as it can be spread to humans mainly from cattle, sheep and goat.**
- **Symptoms are similar to the flu.**

How common is Q fever?

Hundreds of cases of Q fever are notified to Australian health authorities each year, but these are mainly reported in New South Wales and Queensland.

In Western Australia there have been less than 10 cases of Q fever a year notified since 2011. Most of these cases were associated with abattoir workers or farmers.

How do you get it?

You can get Q fever from infected animals by breathing in airborne droplets of their urine, milk, faeces (droppings) or birth products that contain the *Coxiella burnetii* bacteria.

Sheep, cattle, goats, cats, dogs, bandicoots, feral rodents, kangaroos, birds and ticks can all spread Q fever.

It is also possible to get Q fever by drinking unpasteurised milk from an infected animal or by inhaling dust from wool, hides (animal skins) or straw that has been infected with the *Coxiella burnetii* bacteria.

Who is most at risk?

People at increased risk include:

- abattoir and meat processing workers
- veterinarians
- pelt and hide tanners (those who treat animal skins to produce leather goods)
- professional shooters supplying the meat industry, such as kangaroo shooters
- sheep shearers
- sheep, cattle and dairy farmers.

It is recommended that all people working in these industries consider vaccination against Q fever.



What are the signs and symptoms?

Q fever normally causes flu-like symptoms including:

- fever
- chills
- headaches
- sweating
- muscle aches
- general fatigue (feeling tired)
- body weakness.

If untreated Q fever can also cause long-term health complications including:

- pneumonia
- hepatitis
- endocarditis (a heart valve infection, which can be life-threatening).

Notifiable disease

Q fever is a notifiable disease. This means doctors, hospitals and laboratories must inform the Department of Health of your diagnosis. Notification is confidential.

Department of Health staff may talk to you or your doctor to find out how the infection occurred, to identify other people at risk of infection, to let you know about immunisation and to tell you if you need to stay away from work.

How do I know if I have Q fever?

A diagnosis of Q fever must be made by a medical professional who will undertake blood tests to confirm infection. See your doctor if you have had close, ongoing, contact with animals and have the above symptoms.

How is Q fever treated?

Treatment of Q fever with antibiotics is usually successful.



How can Q fever be prevented?

You can reduce the risks of getting Q fever by:

- being vaccinated
- avoiding exposure to animals carrying the *Coxiella burnetii* bacteria
- using protective equipment (face mask, gloves, gowns) as recommended in work guidelines.

Is there a vaccine for Q fever?

There is a vaccine called Q-Vax which offers a high level of protection against Q fever.

However, before you can have the vaccine you must undergo a skin test to determine if you have been exposed to Q fever before. This is to make sure you are not already immune to the virus.

If you are already immune to Q fever and then have the vaccination, you could have a severe reaction such as abscesses at the injection site, fever, headaches and muscle pains.

Where can I get the vaccine?

The Q fever vaccination is available through your doctor, who will have been trained in administering Q fever vaccination which includes a skin test.

People starting work in abattoir and meat processing works are usually offered this screening before commencing work to ensure that they are protected. Ask your employer about this.

More information

- Phone the Australian Q Fever Register Helpline on 1300 733 837.
- Visit WorkSafe Western Australia (external site).

Where to get help

- See your doctor.
- Visit a GP after hours.
- Ring *healthdirect* on 1800 022 222.
- Phone the Australian Q Fever Register Helpline on 1300 733 837.
- Phone your local population health unit.
- Phone the Communicable Disease Control Directorate on 9388 4878.



Remember

- Q fever is a bacterial disease that can be spread to humans mainly from cattle, sheep and goats.
- It mainly affects people who work with livestock.
- Symptoms are similar to the flu.
- There is an effective vaccine available and you must be tested before you can have it.

This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.

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