



## Leptospirosis

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that is a worldwide problem. It is contracted through exposure to stagnant or slow-moving water that contains *Leptospira* bacteria, which usually enter a water source after being shed in the urine of an infected animal (commonly cattle or wildlife).

As a cause of acute and chronic disease in dogs, leptospirosis can cause disease in other animals and in humans. Leptospirosis in cats is very rare. Transmission of the disease also can occur from direct contact with an infected animal, however contact with urine or urine-contaminated surfaces or environments (outdoors) remains the most common route of disease transmission for leptospirosis. *Leptospira* bacteria can penetrate intact or broken skin and mucous membranes. The organisms can persist in soil and standing water, especially in warm, wet climates. Wildlife harboring *Leptospira* can contaminate ponds and other areas of standing water, and these animals, along with cattle, are a major source of the *Leptospira* organisms. Dogs at increased risk for leptospirosis logically include those with access to wet areas or ponds, such as hunting dogs or hiking dogs, particularly those that enjoy playing in wet areas or swimming. Also, dogs with high exposure to other dogs, such as urban dogs or show dogs, are at higher risk of developing leptospirosis.

Acute kidney failure and inflammation of the liver (leptospirosis hepatitis) are common in dogs showing overt symptoms due to leptospirosis. Even dogs that do not show outward signs of infection may harbor the bacteria in the kidneys indefinitely and may later develop kidney failure. In pregnant animals, leptospirosis can cause abortion and stillbirths.

### **Important Points**

- Avoid contact with animal urine. While this recommendation sounds self-evident, even dogs that are apparently healthy can be carriers of leptospirosis and can shed the bacterium (creating the risk for human or animal infection), especially in the urine.
- Vaccinate your dog prior to the possibility of exposure. The vaccine helps protect against four strains of leptospirosis. Vaccines are preventatives; a vaccine will not help (and cannot be given safely) once an animal has contracted the disease.
- Realize that some animals have allergic reactions to vaccines; therefore, the decision for whether or not to vaccinate against leptospirosis should be made after a discussion with your veterinarian regarding risk factors and likelihood of being exposed to leptospirosis.

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