

New York State Department of Health

Tularemia

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is tularemia?

Tularemia is a bacterial disease associated with both animals and man. Although many wild and domestic animals have been infected, the rabbit is most often involved in disease outbreaks. Tularemia in humans is relatively rare in New York State.

Who gets tularemia?

Hunters or other people who spend a great deal of time out of doors are at a greater risk of exposure to tularemia than people with other occupational or recreational interests. Other groups at increased risk include veterinarians and those working with birds of prey (by handling rabbits as food for the bird).

How is tularemia spread?

Many routes of human exposure to tularemia are known to exist. The common routes include inoculation of the skin or mucous membranes with blood or tissue while handling infected animals, bites from infected deer flies or ticks, or handling or eating insufficiently cooked rabbit meat. Less common means of spread are drinking contaminated water, inhaling dust from contaminated soil or handling contaminated pelts or paws of animals.

What are the symptoms of tularemia?

The symptoms of tularemia are varied and depend upon where the organism enters the body. When it enters through the skin, tularemia can be recognized by the presence of a skin lesion and swollen glands. Ingestion of the organism may produce a throat infection, intestinal pain, diarrhea and vomiting. Inhalation of the organism may produce a fever alone or fever combined with a pneumonia-like illness. Pneumonia with tularemia may also occur subsequent to infection through the skin or by ingestion.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear between two and 10 days, but usually after three days.

What is the treatment for tularemia?

Certain antibiotics such as streptomycin are effective in treating tularemia. Others such as gentamycin and tobramycin have also been reported to be effective.

Does past infection with tularemia make a person immune?

Long-term immunity will follow recovery from tularemia, but reinfection has been reported.

What can be done to prevent the spread of tularemia?

Rubber gloves should be worn when skinning or handling animals, especially rabbits. Wild rabbit and rodent meat should be cooked thoroughly before eating. Avoid bites of deer flies and ticks and avoid drinking untreated water. Gloves should be worn and hands should be washed with soap and water following the handling of carcasses.

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