Q fever

What is Q fever?

Q fever is a disease caused by the bacteria Coxiella burnetii, found in mammals, birds, reptiles and arthropods (e.g. ticks). It is most common in ruminants – sheep, cattle and goats. The bacteria are found worldwide, with the exception of New Zealand.

How does Q fever spread?

Q fever bacteria are shed in the milk, urine and faeces of infected animals. Very high numbers of bacteria are found in the placenta and birthing fluids. Once in the environment the bacteria are very resistant and can survive for long periods. They can spread in dust and on the wind. Q fever bacteria can also be spread by ticks or in unpasteurised milk.

Q fever in animals

The disease is usually very mild and you are unlikely to see any signs of illness. Q fever can cause late-term abortions in pregnant cattle, sheep or goats. The disease in animals is usually diagnosed via samples from aborted foetuses or via a blood test. Animals do not have to show signs of illness to transmit the infection to humans.

Q fever in people

Q fever is highly infectious for humans, but only about half those infected show signs of the illness. People usually become infected by breathing in the bacteria. Only a small number of the bacteria are needed to infect a human. Onset of Q fever is usually sudden, resembling the flu, with fever, headache, muscle aches, fatigue, weakness, nausea and vomiting, lasting two to six weeks. In a small number of cases a chronic and debilitating disease occurs. Q fever is an occupational disease of highest risk in meat workers, farmers and veterinarians.

Vaccination

A vaccine is available for humans to reduce the risk of developing Q fever. Only one dose of vaccine is required with booster doses not recommended. You must have a skin and blood test before you have the vaccination to make sure that you have not already been exposed to Q fever.

More information

- Talk to your GP or health professional
- Australian Q Fever Register – 1300 733 837 or www.qfever.org