
TULAREMIA



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS December 31, 2007

What is tularemia and how do people get it?

Tularemia disease can be a mild, moderate, or severe illness affecting one part or many different parts of the body. It is caused by bacteria named *Franciscella tularensis*.

Tularemia bacteria are found naturally in some small animals (rabbits, beavers, and squirrels) in the United States. Tularemia disease is uncommon in humans. In 2004-2005, there was one case of tularemia reported in San Francisco and 4 cases reported within the state of California. Other areas of the country have more naturally-occurring tularemia, especially Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and the island of Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. Sometimes tularemia is called "rabbit fever".

People can touch, eat, or breathe in tularemia bacteria. This is called exposure to tularemia. Not everybody who is exposed to tularemia will get sick. But many will, and as the tularemia bacteria multiply inside the body, they can cause serious illness.

Someone can get exposed to naturally-occurring tularemia by:

- Touching the hair, skin, or meat of an infected animal, often a rabbit, beaver, or squirrel
- Getting a bite from an infected insect, often a tick or deerfly
- Breathing dust or hay contaminated with tularemia bacteria, often while lawn mowing or cutting brush
- Eating or drinking food or water contaminated with tularemia bacteria

Terrorists could use tularemia bacteria to hurt people on purpose by releasing the bacteria in public places.

What if there is a tularemia emergency in San Francisco?

The San Francisco Department of Public Health (SFDPH) has a plan to respond quickly to a tularemia emergency. SFDPH will evaluate the tularemia situation and may recommend ways for people to keep themselves and their family safe. Recommendations may include antibiotics for people who are at risk of illness. SFDPH will also participate in efforts to provide needed medical support and treatment, and to reduce any ongoing sources of tularemia bacteria.

How can I keep from getting tularemia?

To lower your risk of getting tularemia from a natural source:

- Do not handle sick or dead animal bodies. But if you must, then use gloves plus face and eye protection
- Cook all wild meat thoroughly
- Avoid insect bites by using an insect repellent containing DEET
- Only drink water from a safe source
- Consider wearing a facemask when moving the lawn or cutting brush, especially if you are in an area where tularemia is more common.

To lower your risk of getting sick if terrorists release tularemia bacteria on purpose:

- If you were exposed to a suspicious substance or if you were in an area thought to contain tularemia bacteria, it may help to wash your skin and hair thoroughly with soap and water. It may also help to change and wash your clothing, or if you cannot wash your clothes immediately, to put them in a plastic bag to keep them separate from your other things.

Is there a medicine to prevent tularemia disease?

Yes. If you have been exposed to tularemia, there are certain antibiotics you can take before you get sick as a way to prevent illness. These antibiotics can prevent tularemia disease, even if the tularemia bacteria have already gotten into your body. They work best when you start taking them as soon as possible after tularemia exposure. In an emergency involving tularemia, SFDPH will announce which antibiotics to take, who should take them, how and where you can get them, and how to take them after exposure to tularemia.

Is there a vaccine (shot) to prevent tularemia?

No. There is no vaccine for tularemia.

Can I catch tularemia from someone?

No. Tularemia is not contagious (not spread from person to person).

What are the signs of tularemia disease?

Tularemia can show up in different forms, and can look like other, more common illnesses. Signs of tularemia may include one or more of the following:

- Fever, headache, cough, sweats, chills, and chest pain
- Sore throat, cough, wheeze, and chest pain
- Intestinal pain, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea
- Pinkeye (or conjunctivitis) and swollen glands on the face
- Ulcer or wound and swollen glands
- Swelling of the mouth or tonsils and swollen glands at the neck

People can also get pneumonia, have blood in their saliva (spit or sputum), and have trouble breathing.

After exposure to tularemia, illness typically starts in 3-5 days, though the range can be 1-14 days.

See a doctor right away if you are having the signs listed above AND you think you may have been exposed to tularemia. It is important to start medical treatment as soon as possible.

Is there treatment for tularemia disease?

Tularemia disease can be treated with the proper antibiotics. The chance of cure is high, especially if treatment gets started early. Tularemia pneumonia is more dangerous than other forms of the disease. This is why people with tularemia exposure should start taking antibiotics before they get sick.

How can I find information during a tularemia emergency?

Check the SFDPH website www.sfdph.org/cdcp. Local media such as newspapers, TV stations and radio will carry emergency instructions. Emergency radio stations include: KCBS 740 AM and KGO 810 AM.

What can I do now if I am worried about tularemia?

- Read about tularemia at www.sfdph.org/cdcp and at the CDC page www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/tularemia
- Go to www.72hours.org to learn about steps you can take now to prepare for all disasters.
- Keep a card in your wallet with a list of your health problems, the names and doses of medicines you take, and any medicines you are allergic to.