

## Q fever

### What is Q fever?

Q fever is a disease that spreads from animals to humans. It is found all over the world. Q fever is caused by the bacteria *Coxiella burnetii*. These bacteria can live for months and even years in dust or soil.

### What are the symptoms of Q fever?

About half the people who get Q fever will not show any signs of the illness. Most of the time, Q fever is mistaken for an acute viral illness such as influenza.

If you are infected, symptoms that may appear in 2 to 3 weeks include:

- Rapid onset of fever
- Chills and sweating
- Headache
- Muscle pain
- Malaise (a general sick feeling)

In most cases, the illness lasts less than 2 weeks, and does not require special medical treatment. However, some people may develop pneumonia, liver infection, or rare neurological syndromes and will need to consult with their health care provider.

Complications from this disease are rare, and are more likely to happen if you are elderly or have a weakened immune system.

People with diseased or artificial heart valves who get Q fever are at an increased risk of endocarditis, an inflammation of the heart. Women who get Q fever while pregnant are more likely to have a miscarriage.

### How is Q fever spread?

Animals like goats, sheep, cattle, cats, birds, dogs and ticks can carry the Q fever bacteria in

their flesh and body fluids. The highest numbers of these bacteria are found in tissues involved in birth including the uterus, placenta, and birth fluids.

Q fever is very infectious and only a small number of bacteria are needed to make you sick.

You can become infected if you breathe in dust that is contaminated with the bacteria, especially when an infected animal gives birth or aborts. You can also get sick from touching your face after touching contaminated animal tissue or fluids.

*Coxiella* bacteria may also be present in raw milk from infected animals. You may get Q fever by drinking unpasteurized, contaminated milk. The disease rarely, if ever, spreads from person to person.

### What is the treatment for Q fever?

Most people who get Q fever will recover without any special medical treatment. However, in more severe cases antibiotics are used to treat Q fever.

### Who is at risk for Q fever?

Q fever may be present in farming areas, and can affect anyone who works outdoors and is in contact with contaminated soil or dust. Airborne Q fever bacteria can be carried 1 kilometer, or more, downwind. Q fever also spreads easily from room to room in buildings such as farm buildings and laboratories housing infected animals.

People at higher risk for Q fever include:

- Farmers, ranchers, and farm workers who are in contact with goats, sheep and cattle, particularly during the birthing process
- Stockyard workers

- Livestock truck drivers, personnel who service the trucks, and visitors to animal auctions
- Meat packers, rendering plant workers, hide and wool handlers
- Hunters and trappers
- Animal researchers and support staff
- Workers who care for pets and livestock such as veterinary personnel, and zoo attendants
- Certain medical and health care people who have contact with blood, spit or tissue from infected people

### How can Q fever be prevented?

- Appropriately dispose of all livestock and domestic animal birthing products, including placentas, fetal membranes, and aborted fetuses. Birthing products should be disposed of by incineration or burial, as permitted
- Dogs, cats, birds and other animals should not be allowed to scavenge birthing products
- Where possible, separate indoor facilities should be set aside for animal birthing
- Keep the public out of barns and laboratories that are used for housing animals that may be infected
- Consume only pasteurized milk and milk products
- Quarantine imported animals

- Control infected animals
- Because infected animals do not show symptoms, animals should be routinely tested
- Measures should be taken to prevent airflow to other occupied areas of barns or laboratories
- Use protective clothing, gloves and masks while working with these animals (especially pregnant animals)
- Properly disinfect surfaces with a 70% solution of ethanol or a disinfectant containing quaternary ammonium compounds
- Properly dispose of contaminated waste
- Pregnant women should not help with the birthing of livestock
- When visiting farms, livestock auctions or shows, careful sanitation of hands, footwear, trucks and transport trailers etc. is recommended

This HealthLinkBC File was adapted in part from information provided by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS):

[www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/qfever.html](http://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/diseases/qfever.html)



BC Centre for Disease Control  
Provincial Health Services Authority

---

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files) or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) or call **8-1-1** (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call **7-1-1**. Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.