

Q FEVER (Query Fever) Frequently Asked Questions

What is Q fever?

Q fever, or Query fever, is a disease caused by a type of bacterium called a rickettsia. Many types of animals can be infected by this particular rickettsia, including goats, sheep, cattle, dogs, cats, and birds. In humans, infection can cause fever with many other symptoms such as headache, cough, diarrhea, and vomiting. It can rarely progress to more severe illness like pneumonia, liver disease, and meningitis.

Who gets Q fever?

Those at highest risk for Q fever are farmers, slaughterhouse workers, veterinarians, or people working around animals such as sheep, goats, and cattle. Also at risk are laboratory workers exposed to the organism or the animals mentioned above, especially if the animals have recently given birth. At lower risk are domestic pet owners, such as owners of cats that have recently given birth.

How is Q fever spread?

Q fever is spread when animal milk, urine, or stool mixes with dust and becomes spread by the wind. Drinking unpasteurized milk from cows, goats, or other animals may also cause infection. Animal sources such as wool, straw, or fertilizer may be contaminated with milk, urine, or stool and can also spread disease by the same airborne route.

What are the symptoms of Q fever?

Symptoms vary from mild to severe. They include fever, headache, sore muscles, sore throat, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and cough that can persist for weeks to months. Some people experience no symptoms at all. In rare cases, the disease progresses to lung, liver, and brain disease, accompanied by symptoms such as chest pain, jaundice, and confusion.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally appear two to three weeks after exposure, but it can be shorter or longer depending on the dose of infecting organisms.

When and for how long is a person able to spread this infection?

Q fever is not spread person-to-person, except in rare cases of sexual transmission.

What are the complications of Q fever?

A small percentage of people with acute Q fever develop severe disease that includes pneumonia, liver disease, or meningitis; these diseases can be fatal. Among those who recover from acute Q fever, a few may go on to develop chronic Q fever, which mainly involves the spread of infection to the valves of the heart. This occurs primarily in people who have had heart surgery and have artificial heart valves.

What is the treatment for Q fever?

Acute Q fever is treated with antibiotics for a period of 15 to 21 days. Chronic Q fever is treated with several different antibiotics in combination for a longer period of time. Those suffering valvular heart disease usually require surgery in addition to antibiotics.



How can Q fever be prevented?

Never consume unpasteurized milk or milk products. People in high-risk occupations should ensure adequate disinfection and disposal of animal products and should restrict access to pregnant animals that may be shedding the organism in large numbers. There is no vaccine to prevent Q fever available in the United States. Antibiotics given after exposure can prevent symptoms from occurring, but they are most effective if given about one to two weeks after exposure.

Where can I get additional information on Q fever?

- Epidemiology Branch, Georgia Division of Public Health: 404-657-2588
- CDC - <http://www.cdc.gov/qfever/>