

WEIL'S DISEASE



Introduction

Weil's disease (or leptospirosis) is a relatively rare bacterial infection caused by allowing water that has been contaminated by rat's urine to come into contact open wounds, the eyes, or with the mucous membranes.

Level of Risk

About 40 people a year catch Weil's Disease in England and Wales. It can sometimes be fatal if not treated early enough. A handful of people have died of it in UK in the last 15 years.

Mostly it affects people who work in water treatment works, farmers or anglers (no loss there), but it is also a danger to rowers and canoeists. There have been cases on the Thames. We often see rats on the canal and river bank and we know that they readily populate farmland and urban areas close to the canal and rivers that we use.

In this country most cases of Weil's Disease occur in the summer and early Spring. The main danger is on the bank, but you can get infected from the water. And it's most likely the infection gets into the body by cuts or blisters - but there's still a chance of infection if you drink from a bottle that's had river water splashed on it, or eat a sandwich half way through a trip without washing your hands.

Precautions

If you have open wounds (cuts, rashes, blisters etc) either do not paddle until healed or take care to cover the wound with a waterproof bandage and thoroughly disinfect the area after paddling using an anti-bacterial disinfectant.

If you should sustain an injury (for example a cut or blister) whilst paddling disinfect at the earliest opportunity to ensure the wound is clean and cover with a barrier cream such as 'Siopel'.

Always wash your hands as soon as you come off the water and avoid eating or putting your fingers anywhere near your mouth/nose/eyes until they have been thoroughly washed.

Symptoms

Broadly speaking, you get initial mild symptoms 7-14 after infection, but they can be from 3-30 days. Main symptoms are fever (temperature above 38 centigrade), severe joint pain, especially calf muscles, headache and chills.

The symptoms of severe leptospirosis develop one to three days after the symptoms of mild leptospirosis have passed. At this point the disease can infect one or more major organs (liver, kidneys, heart, brain and lungs). In rare fatal cases the infection, if untreated, causes death through multiple organ failure

Symptoms... <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Leptospirosis/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>

What to do if you think you may have contracted Weil's Disease

There is a low level of knowledge of this condition in the medical profession. The disease is sufficiently rare that flu-like symptoms are often mis-diagnosed.

Once you get these initial symptoms, you need to get antibiotic treatment immediately. Most GPs know nothing about the disease, so you need to be very assertive. They can arrange for a blood test, but the time it takes to get the results can make the condition much worse - so it's best to demand antibiotics just in case. Print the following sheets and take them in to your doctor...

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg84.pdf>