

Fact Sheet: Tularemia

What is Tularemia?

Tularemia, also known as “rabbit fever,” is a rare but serious illness that occurs throughout North America. It is caused by the bacterium, *Francisella tularensis*, which is found in wild animals (especially rodents, rabbits, hares, muskrats, and beavers). Since a very small number of the tularemia bacteria can cause disease, it could be used to intentionally harm the public.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of tularemia include:

- Sudden high fever
- Chills
- Headaches
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- General body aches
- Dry cough
- Progressive weakness

Some people may develop pneumonia. Other symptoms depend on how the person was exposed to the tularemia bacteria. These include: ulcers on the skin or mouth, painful swollen lymph glands, swollen and painful eyes, and a sore throat.

Symptoms usually appear three to five days after exposure to the bacteria, but can take as long as 14 days.

How is it spread?

People can become infected in several ways:

- Being bitten by an infected tick or deerfly
- Handling infected dead animals, pelts, or paws
- Eating or drinking contaminated meat or water
- Inhaling the tularemia bacteria from contaminated soil, grain, or hay.

Tularemia is NOT known to be spread from person to person.

How is the disease treated?

If you think you have symptoms of or have possibly been exposed to tularemia, see a doctor immediately for treatment. Your doctor may recommend treatment with antibiotics. If you are given antibiotics, you must follow the doctor’s instructions and take all of the medication you are given. Tularemia can be fatal if it is not treated with enough of the right antibiotics.

How is it prevented?

- Avoid drinking, bathing, swimming or working in untreated water in areas where there are potentially infected wild animals.
- Cook your food thoroughly, especially meat from wild rabbits and rodents.
- Use water-proof gloves when handling dead animals, especially rabbits.
- Wash your hands often, using soap and warm water, especially after contact with any animals.
- Use insect repellent containing DEET on your skin.
- Treat clothing with insect repellent containing permethrin if you are in an area where tularemia has occurred.

Pay attention to any change in pet or livestock behavior (especially rodents, rabbits, and hares). Consult a veterinarian immediately if they develop unusual symptoms.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.