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Health Department

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## Tularemia

February 2012

### What is tularemia?

Tularemia, also known as “rabbit fever,” is a disease caused by the bacterium *Francis Ella tularemia*.

Tularemia is typically found in animals, especially rodents, rabbits and hares.

### How do people become infected with tularemia?

Typically, people become infected through the bite of infected insects (most commonly ticks and deerflies), by handling infected sick or dead animals, by eating or drinking contaminated food or water, or by inhaling airborne bacteria. Tularemia is not known to spread from person to person.

### What are the signs and symptoms of tularemia?

The symptoms of tularemia vary depending on how the person was exposed. Possible symptoms include skin ulcers, swollen and painful lymph glands, inflamed eyes, sore throat, mouth sores, diarrhea or pneumonia. If the bacteria are inhaled, symptoms can include quick onset of fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, joint pain, dry cough and progressive weakness. Tularemia can be fatal if the person is not treated with appropriate antibiotics.

Symptoms typically appear three to five days after exposure, but it can range from one to 14 days.

### How is tularemia treated?

Early antibiotic treatment is recommended whenever it is likely a person was exposed to tularemia or has been diagnosed as being infected with tularemia. If you suspect you were exposed to tularemia bacteria, see a health care provider as soon as possible.

Treatment with antibiotics for 10-14 days or more after exposure may be recommended.

### How can you prevent tularemia?

Use insect repellent containing DEET on your skin, or treat clothing with repellent containing pyrethrum, to prevent insect bites. Wash your hands often using soap and warm water, especially after handling dead animals. Be sure to cook your food completely and that your water is from a safe source.

A vaccine for tularemia was used in the past to protect laboratory workers, but is not currently available. If someone suspects he or she has been exposed to tularemia bacteria, local and state health departments should be notified immediately so an investigation and infection-control activities can begin.

### Can tularemia be used for bioterrorism?

If *Francis Ella tularemia* were used as a bioweapon, the bacteria would likely be made airborne so it could be inhaled. If they are not treated, people who inhale the bacteria may experience severe respiratory illness, including life-threatening pneumonia and infection. The bacteria are highly infectious, and a small number can cause the disease.

### For more information:

Call the Sedgwick County Health Department  
Public Health Incident Planning and Response  
(PHIPR) at (316) 660-5551 or visit  
[www.sedgwickcounty.org](http://www.sedgwickcounty.org).