NT Health

Centre for Disease Control

Public health alert

Issued: 5 November 2026
Issued to: All Clinicians

Leptospirosis

Situation

- Leptospirosis is an infection caused by the bacteria *Leptospira*. People can become infected through skin contact with water, wet soil or vegetation that is contaminated with the urine of animals carrying the bacteria, particularly rats, cattle and feral pigs. It can also be acquired when contaminated water or mud enters the mouth, nose and eyes.
- On average there are 10 cases per year in the NT with 11 cases reported so far in 2026.
- This year, 4 cases have required admission to ICU and there has unfortunately been 1 reported death.
- With hunting and mustering activities underway, further cases of leptospirosis may be identified.
- Targeted advice has been provided to at-risk groups, including hunters.

Who is at risk

- People at risk are those who have close contact with potentially infected animals or who are exposed to water, mud, soil or vegetation that has been contaminated with the urine of infected animals.
- Within the NT, areas associated with cases include Fogg Dam/Harrison Dam, Oenpelli, Arnhem Land wetlands, Finniss River, and Tippery Station. Rural Darwin and the Katherine district have also been identified, particularly around water and flooding events.

Signs and Symptoms

- Symptoms generally occur 5-14 days after exposure but may range from 2 to 30 days. The illness lasts from a few days to 3 weeks or longer.
- Initial symptoms include a sudden onset of fever with headaches, chills, severe muscle pain (particularly legs and lower back), red, sore or bloodshot eyes, diarrhoea and vomiting.
- Signs and presentation symptoms and severity vary widely but the disease can be life-threatening.
- Complications include jaundice, bleeding, difficulty breathing and confusion. In rare cases, leptospirosis can be fatal.

Treatment

- Consider early antibiotic treatment if there is a suspected case of leptospirosis, to reduce the likelihood of developing severe disease. Antibiotics include penicillin or doxycycline.
- Other treatment is mainly supportive.

Prevention

- To help protect yourself against leptospirosis you can do the following:
  - cattle workers and hunters should wear long pants, boots, long sleeve shirts and avoid drinking or smoking while undertaking these activities
  - avoid swimming or wading in water that may be contaminated
  - cover all cuts or abrasions with waterproof dressings
  - thoroughly wash hands and arms in soapy water after handling animals or carcasses, or after coming into contact with liquids that may be contaminated
  - shower thoroughly after contact with potentially contaminated water or soil
  - do not touch your mouth, nose, eyes (and especially do not smoke) while handling animals that may be infected
  - wash and dry hands before smoking or eating
  - prevent contamination of living and recreational areas with the urine of infected animals, including keeping working dogs out of the house yard
  - control rodents by removing rubbish and food sources from close to housing
  - do not feed dogs raw offal or feral meat because this may infect them.

Contact & advice

Please contact the Surveillance and Response Unit at NT CDC on 08 8922 8044 for additional guidance.

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