

Q FEVER

WHAT IS Q FEVER?

Q fever is a disease caused by a bacterium called *Coxiella burnetii*. It is called a zoonotic disease, which means that it is spread to humans by infected animals.

HOW IS Q FEVER SPREAD?

- Cattle, sheep and goats are the main animals that are sources of this disease for humans. Other animals such as bandicoots, kangaroos, and dogs can also be infected with this disease.
- Infected animals shed the bacterium into their urine, faeces, milk, and birth by-products.
- The disease is transferred to humans when they inhale droplets contaminated with bacteria and produced during the slaughter of an infected animal or through the waste products (urine, faeces, milk, and birth by-products) of an infected animal.
- People can also be infected by inhaling dust from contaminated materials (for example, dried faeces).

WHO IS AT RISK OF Q FEVER?

- Q fever is mainly an occupationally-acquired disease in workers in the livestock, agriculture, and meat industries.
- People in these industries are more likely to come in contact with aerosols (airborne particles) created from tissue, waste, and dust from infected animals.
- Others who are at risk are veterinarians, stockyard workers, and agricultural and farm workers.
- Some workers in these industries have been exposed over the years and have become immune to the disease without becoming sick.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF Q FEVER?

- From the time of exposure, it takes about 19–21 days for the symptoms to appear.
- The more common symptoms are fever, which can last for 5–50 days or more; chills, which last for 3–4 days; profuse sweats, severe headache, myalgia (muscle pain), arthralgia (painful joints) profound fatigue, nausea, photophobia (aversion to light), and weight loss.
- These symptoms can mimic influenza, and Q fever can sometimes be difficult to diagnose.

- Acute Q fever can last from 2–6 weeks, during which time there can be substantial weight loss.
- People with an acute infection of Q fever usually make a full recovery and will rarely have a second attack of the disease.
- Sometime acute infection can cause ongoing symptoms (that is, chronic Q fever).
- Chronic Q fever can lead to complications such as endocarditis (inflammation of the interior of the heart), and post-Q fever fatigue syndrome.

HOW IS Q FEVER DIAGNOSED?

- Q fever is diagnosed by blood tests.
- Blood tests can determine antibody levels to *Coxiella burnetii*.
- Blood tests are repeated at intervals to assess antibody response to the infection.

IS THERE A VACCINE FOR Q FEVER?

- There is a vaccine available for Q fever. It is recommended for people who are entering into, or are working in, occupations that involve risk of exposure to the disease—such as abattoir workers, shearers or livestock farmers.
- People commencing work in these industries are at high risk of contracting the disease.
- People in these occupations are much more at risk of being exposed to Q Fever than the general public.
- Before vaccination, people must have skin and blood tests to determine if they have previously been infected with Q fever.

IS THERE ANY TREATMENT FOR Q FEVER?

- Yes there are antibiotics that are effective against *Coxiella burnetii*.
- The main antibiotics used to treat Q Fever are tetracyclines; however, there are other antibiotics that can be used if a person is allergic to tetracyclines.

For further information please contact your local public health unit, community health centre, or doctor.

August 2002. ☒