



# Q fever

## Key points

- Q fever is a bacterial disease that can spread to humans from animals, mainly cattle, sheep and goats.
- It mainly affects people who work with livestock.
- Symptoms are similar to the flu.
- Q fever can be treated with antibiotics.
- There is a safe and effective vaccine available, which is recommended for anyone who is at risk.

## What is Q fever?

Q fever is a bacterial infection caused by *Coxiella burnetii*. It spreads to humans from animals, mainly cattle, sheep and goats. The bacteria are found in many other animals including dogs, cats, horses, pigs, feral rodents, bandicoots, kangaroos, birds and ticks. Infected animals often have no symptoms.

In Western Australia, there are typically less than 10 cases notified each year. Most cases are either farmers or abattoir workers.

## How do you get it?

You can get Q fever by breathing in aerosols, soil or dust contaminated with bacteria from urine, milk, faeces (droppings) or birth products of infected animals.

It is also possible to get Q fever by drinking unpasteurised milk from an infected animal or by inhaling dust from wool, hides (animal skins) or straw that has been infected with the bacteria.

The bacteria can survive in soil and dust for many years and can be spread over several kilometres by the wind. Person-to-person spread is rare.

## Who is at risk?

Anyone who works with livestock is at risk, including farmers, farm employees, graziers, shearers, livestock transporters and abattoir workers. Other people at risk include those with direct contact with animals, including veterinarians, dog/cat breeders, wildlife carers and people living on hobby farms. People who live near livestock or occasionally visit farm environments could also be at risk.

## Signs and symptoms

Many people have no or few symptoms. People who do become sick often have a severe flu-like illness. Symptoms begin 2 to 3 weeks after coming into contact with the bacteria and can include:

- high fever and chills
- severe night sweats
- severe headaches, often behind the eyes
- muscle and joint pain
- extreme fatigue
- weight loss.

People may also develop inflammation of the liver (hepatitis), infection of the lungs (pneumonia), or infection of the heart valve (endocarditis) during the course of illness.

Without treatment, symptoms can last from 2 to 6 weeks. Some people can also develop chronic fatigue which can last for years.

## How do I know if I have Q fever?

Your doctor can diagnose Q fever based on symptoms, clinical examination and blood tests.

## Treatment of Q fever

If given soon after illness has begun, appropriate antibiotics can reduce the time for which people have Q fever and reduce the risk of long-term complications.

It is important to seek early medical attention



if you develop symptoms of Q fever and are at risk of infection.

Q fever is usually an acute (short-term) infection, but sometimes it can lead to chronic (long-term) illness.

Most people make a full recovery and become immune to repeat infections.

## How can Q fever be prevented?

A safe and effective Q fever vaccine (Q-Vax) is available to protect people against the disease. Vaccination is recommended for adolescents aged  $\geq 15$  years and adults who work in a high-risk occupation, or for those at risk of environmental exposure.

The Australian Q fever Register ([www.qfever.org](http://www.qfever.org)) has a list of doctors specifically trained to deliver Q fever vaccinations.

Apart from vaccination, you can do the following to reduce your risk:

- Wash hands and arms thoroughly in soapy water after any contact with animals or animal products.
- Wear a mask and gloves when handling and disposing of animal products, waste, placentas and aborted fetuses.
- Any clothing contaminated with animal products should be bagged and washed separately only by those immune to Q fever.

## Notifiable disease

Q fever is a notifiable disease. Laboratories and doctors must inform the Department of Health of a diagnosis, including suspected or confirmed cases. Notification is confidential. Department of Health staff investigate each case to determine the likely source of infection, identify other people at risk of infection and ensure control measures are in

place. They will also let other people at risk know about immunisation and if they are required to stay away from work.

## More information

- Australian Q fever register helpline on 1300 733 837
- WorkSafe Western Australia (external site)

## Where to get help

If you are unwell:

- See a GP and let them know you are concerned about Q fever.
- Ring *healthdirect Australia* on 1800 022 222.
- Attend a hospital emergency department for urgent medical attention or if you are severely unwell.

For additional information:

- Phone the Australian Q fever register helpline on 1300 733 837
- Phone your local [public health unit](#)

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### Acknowledgements: Public Health

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