

Leptospirosis and Weil's Disease

All paddlers, parents and carers should be aware of Leptospirosis.

Please note that this article has been written with good intentions: as far as I am aware, the statistics in this article are correct, and the advice given is sensible. Links to official sources have been given at the bottom of the article.

What is Leptospirosis?

Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection carried in rat or cattle urine which may contaminate water in lakes, rivers, canals etc. The bacteria does not survive long in dry conditions or salt water.

The infection is caught by direct contact with the urine or polluted environment. Bacteria enter through skin abrasions or via eyes, nose or mouth.

The usual incubation is 2 to 12 days. Usually a 'flu' like illness occurs which resolves in 2-3 weeks. There may be fever, severe headache, pains in the back and calf and prostration. A few cases develop jaundice, when the condition is known as Weil's disease.

The Level of Risk

It must be stressed that this is an extremely rare infection: to put it in perspective, well over a million people canoe or kayak each year, and fewer than ten catch leptospirosis. The chances of it deteriorating into the far more serious Weil's disease are even more rare.

The most at risk group is adult males. By far the most common cause of leptospirosis is drinking from bottles bought in a pub as these have probably been stored in cellars to which rats have access! Anglers are also far more likely to catch it than paddlers.

Nevertheless, precautions should be taken on the water as Weil's disease is very serious

illness and must be swiftly diagnosed and treated. Antibiotics during the first few days help in limiting infection. Many cases recover without specific treatment.

In its early stages, leptospirosis is very hard to distinguish from flu. If you are concerned, you **MUST** go to the doctor, and if the doctor says its flu, you **MUST** insist that tests are done for Weill's Disease. Don't take no for an answer. There are only about 40-50 cases of Weill's disease in the UK every year, and 2-3 deaths. All of the deaths could have been prevented.

How to minimise risk of Leptospirosis when paddling

- * Cover all cuts and abrasions with waterproof plasters.
- * Don't rub eyes or put fingers in eyes or nose.
- * Wash hands as soon as you've finished paddling.
- * Have a shower as soon as you get home.
- * If in doubt contact your doctor early.

What to do if you think someone may be infected

If you think you may have the infection go to your doctor and explain that there may be a risk of leptospirosis. The diagnosis is by clinical suspicion. Blood tests can rarely confirm the illness in time to affect treatment but are needed to subsequently confirm it.

To repeat, **don't be fobbed off: and if the doctor says its flu, you MUST insist that tests are done for Weil 's disease.**

Further information is available from The Leptospirosis Reference Unit, Public Health Laboratory, County Hospital, Hereford, HR1 2ER

See also, this Health and Safety Executive

leaflet: <http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg84.pdf>