

# Frequently Asked Questions: Canine Leptospirosis

Katharine F. Lunn, BVMS, MS, PhD, MRCVS, DACVIM  
North Carolina State University  
College of Veterinary Medicine



- 1 How did my dog get leptospirosis?**

The exact source of infection cannot be determined in a specific patient, but the infection usually comes from contact with infected urine from wild animals. This could be from a contaminated water source such as a pond or stream, or just from wild animals passing through the backyard.
- 2 My dog never swims or goes in the water and only goes outside to eliminate. How could he possibly get exposed to leptospirosis?**

Unfortunately, your dog was probably just in the wrong place at the wrong time. If an infected wild animal happened to urinate in your backyard, and your dog later sniffed or licked that area, then he could have been infected at that time.
- 3 But I always thought this was mainly a disease of outdoor and hunting dogs?**

No. Any dog is susceptible, and many veterinarians see cases in small breed dogs, indoor dogs, and “lap dogs” that rarely go outside.
- 4 Which wild animals carry leptospirosis?**

Many animals can carry the infection, including those that we commonly see in our backyards and neighborhoods. Examples include skunks, opossums, raccoons, foxes, moles, mice, rats, deer, and squirrels.
- 5 Can people get leptospirosis?**

Yes, it is a zoonotic disease, meaning that it can be transmitted to people from animals.
- 6 Can I catch leptospirosis from my dog?**

There is a risk, but it is decreased once your dog starts antibiotic therapy. Humans can also catch leptospirosis from contaminated water sources, from non-companion domestic animals, and from wild rodents. Because of the potential risk, it is important to take precautions once your pet comes home.

(continued) ►

## Frequently Asked Questions: Canine Leptospirosis *(continued)*

**7 What precautions should I take?**  
Until the course of antibiotics is finished, wash your hands thoroughly after handling your pet and his or her bedding, food, and water bowls. Do *not* allow your dog to lick your face. Wear gloves and use bleach or other household disinfectants to clean up any urine accidents in the house. Minimize contact between your pet and anyone who is pregnant or immunosuppressed (eg, receiving immunosuppressive drugs, infected with HIV) until the course of antibiotics is finished. You should also consult with your family physician.

**8 Can I safely pet my dog?**  
Yes, just petting your dog should not put you at great risk if you are otherwise healthy, but wash your hands afterward, and always avoid direct contact with urine.

**9 What should I do to make my backyard safer?**  
It is not really possible to eliminate infection from the backyard. If you see your dog urinate on a hard surface outside, spray the area with a disinfectant or bleach, and continue to spray until the antibiotics are finished. The organisms are killed by sunlight and by freezing temperatures, so depending on your climate, they may not survive for long. You should not encourage wildlife to visit your yard by feeding them, although it is not possible to eliminate all animal visitors that may pass through the neighborhood.

**10 What about my other dogs? They are not sick, but could they get leptospirosis also?**  
Provided your affected dog completes the antibiotic course, your other dogs probably will not get leptospirosis. However, if all your dogs spend time in the same environment, others may have been exposed. Depending on the risk of infection, your veterinarian may elect to treat these dogs preventively.

**11 How will I know if I have leptospirosis?**  
People with leptospirosis exhibit a variety of symptoms, including flu-like symptoms and liver or kidney disease. A veterinarian cannot make the diagnosis or give you medical advice, but may strongly recommend you consult your physician if you have any symptoms of illness, particularly if you are pregnant or have a suppressed immune system.

**12 Should all dogs be vaccinated against leptospirosis?**  
All dogs are potentially susceptible to leptospirosis, and the risks and benefits of vaccination should be discussed with your veterinarian. There is evidence that vaccines provide protection for at least one year.

**13 What else should I know?**  
You must complete the course of prescribed antibiotics to ensure that the infection is properly eliminated. Bring your dog back for follow-up testing, which may help prove or disprove that your dog has leptospirosis and allow his or her recovery to be monitored.