

Q Fever

Background Information

Q fever is a bacterial disease, principally of sheep, goats and cattle, but other animals including cats, small mammals and ticks can be infected. Infected animals often show no disease symptoms, but it is sometimes associated with abortion in cattle and sheep. Q fever can be spread to humans. In most people it only causes a mild flu-like illness, but it can lead to more severe disease.

Organism

Coxiella burnetti

Incidence and Transmission

Infection is found in UK sheep and cattle. There are between 50–100 human cases each year in the UK.

The disease is spread mostly in the air, via dust from infected material, particularly afterbirth, urine and faeces, but can also be spread via direct contact with infected animals. The bacteria are very resistant to drying out and so can survive for many months in the environment. Only a very small number of bacteria are required for infection. It may be acquired by drinking unpasteurised milk.

Q fever is not generally spread from person to person.

Occupations and processes where Q fever may present a risk

Occupational exposure to *Coxiella burnetti* may occur in those who:

- are in contact with infected animals – particularly during delivery of lambs, kids and calves; or
- work with materials or products from infected animals – particularly the afterbirth from infected sheep, goats and cattle, or handling contaminated bedding.

Occupations where there may be a risk of occupationally acquired Q fever include:

- farmers;
- abattoir workers, meat processing plant workers and butchers; and
- veterinary surgeons.

Clinical Information

The incubation period is usually 2–3 weeks (may be 2–40 days).

Infection does not always lead to symptoms, but symptoms are usually flu-like, including fever, headache and muscle pain which may last up to 2 weeks.

Occasionally more serious symptoms develop and hospitalisation may be required. In some cases a chronic illness may develop and in case cases may be fatal. Q fever in pregnancy may lead to effects on the unborn child.

Anyone with severe symptoms should seek medical attention to receive antibiotic treatment.

Control

The following control measures reduce the risk of infection:

- Suitable protective clothing should be worn when assisting in delivery of lambs and calves.
- Animal birth products should be disposed of appropriately.
- Good occupational hygiene practices should be followed, especially washing with warm water and soap.
- Cuts and abrasions should be covered with waterproof dressings.
- A suitable disinfectant should be used.
- Pregnant women should not assist in delivery of lambs, kids or calves.
- Do not drink unpasteurised milk.

Further Information

[Public Health England – Q fever](#)

[NHS Choices – Q fever](#)

[Defra – Advice to pregnant women during lambing](#)