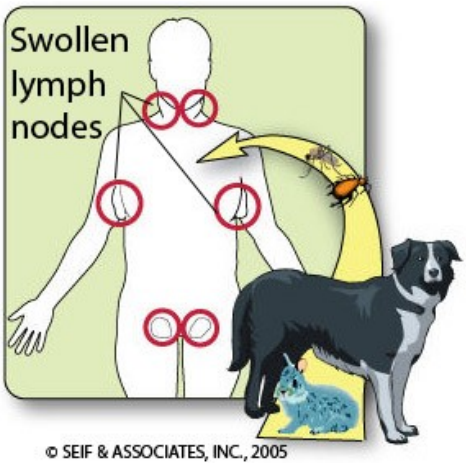
Tularemia, Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS TULAREMIA?

Tularemia is also known as “rabbit fever”. It is a disease caused by the bacterium Francisella tularensis.
Tularemia is typically found in:

- Animals, especially rodents.
- Rabbits.
- Hares.

It is usually a rural disease.



HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME INFECTED WITH TULAREMIA?

People become infected through:

- The bite of infected insects:
  - Ticks.
  - Deerflies.
- Handling infected sick or dead animals.
- Eating or drinking contaminated food or water.
- Inhaling airborne bacteria.

TULAREMIA OCCURS NATURALLY

It is a widespread disease in animals. Nearly all cases occur in rural areas. Nearly all cases are caused by:

- The bites of ticks and biting flies.
- Handling infected rodents, rabbits, or hares.
- Inhaling airborne bacteria and from laboratory accidents.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The signs and symptoms people develop depend on how they are exposed to the disease. Possible symptoms include:

- Skin ulcers.
- Swollen and painful lymph glands.
- Inflamed eyes.
- Sore throat.
- Mouth sores.
- Diarrhea or pneumonia.

If the bacteria are inhaled, symptoms can include:

- Abrupt onset of fever.
- Chills.
- Headache.
- Muscle aches.
- Joint pain.
- Dry cough.
- Progressive weakness.

People with pneumonia can develop:

- Chest pain.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Bloody sputum.
- Respiratory failure.

This disease can be fatal if the person is not treated with appropriate antibiotics.

CONCERNS ABOUT TULAREMIA BEING USED AS A BIOWEAPON

Francisella tularensis is highly infectious. A small number of bacteria (10-50 organisms) can cause disease. If it were used as a bioweapon, the bacteria would likely be made airborne so they could be inhaled. People who inhale the bacteria can experience severe respiratory illness, including life-threatening pneumonia and systemic infection, if they are not treated.

CAN YOU GET IT FROM ANOTHER PERSON?

People have not been known to transmit the infection to others. So infected persons do not need to be isolated.

HOW QUICKLY WOULD SOMEONE BECOME SICK IF HE OR SHE WERE EXPOSED TO TULAREMIA BACTERIA?

The incubation period (the time from being exposed to becoming ill) is typically 3 to 5 days. But it can range from 1 to 14 days.

WHAT SHOULD SOMEONE DO IF HE OR SHE SUSPECTS EXPOSURE TO TULAREMIA BACTERIA?

If you suspect you were exposed, see a doctor quickly. Treatment with antibiotics for a period of 10-14 days or more after exposure may be recommended. If you are given antibiotics, it is important to take them according to the instructions you receive. Take all of the medication you are given.

Local and state health departments should be notified immediately. Then an investigation and infection control activities can begin.

HOW IS TULAREMIA DIAGNOSED?

The healthcare worker collects specimens, such as blood or sputum. This is used for testing in a diagnostic or reference laboratory. Laboratory test results for tularemia may be presumptive or confirmatory. Presumptive (preliminary) identification may take less than 2 hours. But confirmatory testing will take more time. Often it can take 24 to 48 hours or longer depending on the methods that need to be used.

CAN TULAREMIA BE TREATED WITH ANTIBIOTICS?

Yes. Early antibiotic treatment is recommended when a person:

- Was exposed to tularemia.
- Has been diagnosed as being infected with tularemia.

Several types of antibiotics are effective.

HOW LONG CAN FRANCISELLA TULARENSIS EXIST IN THE ENVIRONMENT?

Francisella tularensis can remain alive for weeks in water and soil.

Based on information Courtesy of the CDC.

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