

New York State Department of Health

Brucellosis

Last Reviewed: November 2006

What is brucellosis?

Brucellosis is a bacterial disease that can affect any organs of the body. Brucellosis is not very common in the United States with 100-200 cases reported every year.

Who gets brucellosis?

Everyone is susceptible to the bacteria and may get the disease if exposed. It is more likely to be found in people associated with the cleaning and butchering of deer and livestock or the consumption of unpasteurized dairy products.

How is brucellosis spread?

The bacteria that cause this disease are found in unpasteurized milk from diseased cows and also from discharges from cattle or goats that abort their fetus. It is unlikely that this disease would be spread from person to person. However, infected mothers could transmit the infection to their infants through breast milk.

What are the symptoms of brucellosis?

Symptoms of brucellosis include intermittent or irregular fever of variable duration, headache, weakness, profuse sweating, chills, weight loss and generalized aching. Brucellosis can also cause long-lasting or chronic symptoms such as recurrent fevers, joint pain and fatigue.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The time period is highly variable, but symptoms usually appear within five to 30 days.

Does past infection with brucellosis make a person immune?

It is unlikely that an individual will be reinfected. However, if not properly treated, the disease may last for up to a year.

What is the treatment for brucellosis?

Tetracycline or tetracycline plus streptomycin is the treatment of choice. Rifampin and doxycycline may cause fewer intestinal side-effects. Early diagnosis leading to prompt treatment is essential to prevent chronic infection.

What can be done to prevent the spread of brucellosis?

The use of pasteurized milk and cheeses and prevention of contact with infected cattle, sheep or goats will reduce the risk of infection. In addition, those who are involved in the slaughter and butchering of livestock and other animals should wear rubber gloves when coming into contact with the blood and viscera of animals.

I am a veterinarian, and I recently accidentally jabbed myself with the animal vaccine (RB-51 or strain 19, or REV-1) while I was vaccinating cows (or sheep, goats). What do I need to do?

These are live vaccines, and strain 19 is known to cause disease in humans. Although we know less about the other vaccines, the recommendations are the same. You should see a health care provider. A baseline blood sample should be collected for testing for antibodies. We recommend that you take antibiotics (doxycycline and rifampin for strain 19 and REV-1, or doxycycline alone for RB-51) for three weeks. At the end of that time you should be rechecked and a second blood sample should be collected. (The sample can also be collected at two weeks.) The same recommendations hold true for spraying vaccine in the eyes (six weeks of treatment in this case) or spraying onto open wounds on the skin.

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