

# IDRS Infectious Disease Reporting System

Disease Reporting 24 Hours a Day

Columbus Public Health and Franklin County Public Health

## TULAREMIA

Tularemia, also known as “rabbit fever,” is a disease caused by the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*. Tularemia is typically found in wild animals and insects, especially rodents, rabbits, ticks, and deerflies. About 200 human cases of tularemia are reported each year in the United States, mostly in the south-central and western states.

### Symptoms

Symptoms usually appear 3 to 5 days after exposure, but can take as long as 14 days. The main symptom is fever, which can be as high as 104 °F. Other symptoms vary depending on how the bacteria enter the body:

- Swallowing the organism (such as in food or water) may cause:
  - Sore throat, intestinal pain, diarrhea and vomiting.
  - Mouth ulcers, swollen tonsils, and swollen glands in the neck.
- Breathing in the organism may cause
  - Chest pain, dry cough, bloody sputum (phlegm), and difficulty breathing. This is the most serious.
- Skin exposure, such as an insect bite or handling an infected animal:
  - A skin ulcer or sore may occur at the site where the organism entered the body.
  - Swelling of lymph glands in one area (near the sore, if there is one), usually in the armpit or groin.
- Eye exposure, such as when a person butchers an infected animal and touches his or her eyes:
  - Irritation and inflammation of eye and swelling of lymph glands in front of the ear.

### Transmission

- People become infected through the bite of infected insects (such as ticks and deerflies), handling infected sick or dead animals, eating or drinking contaminated food or water. Hunters, trappers, hikers, campers and others who spend a great deal of time outdoors or handle wild animals are at risk.
- Tularemia is not spread from person to person. It has potential for use as a biological weapon.

### Treatment

- Samples of blood or saliva can be tested for tularemia in a laboratory.
- People who have been exposed to the tularemia bacteria should be treated as soon as possible. The disease can be fatal if it is not treated with the right antibiotics.

### Prevention

- Always wear rubber gloves when skinning or dressing wild game, especially rabbits. Thoroughly cook wild game before eating. Wash your hands often, using soap and warm water, especially after handling animals. When camping or away from home, make sure your water is from a safe source.
- Use insect repellent containing DEET or permethrin to prevent insect bites. Wear long sleeves and pants.
- Note any change in the behavior of your pets (especially rodents, rabbits, and hares) or livestock, and consult a veterinarian if they develop unusual symptoms.

### Bioterrorism

Tularemia is considered a potential bioweapon. If it were used as a weapon, the bacteria would likely be made airborne so that people would breathe it in. The CDC operates a national program for bioterrorism preparedness that includes stockpiling antibiotics and plans for distributing these in an emergency.

**All information is general in nature and is not intended to be used as a substitute for appropriate professional advice.**



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