

Code of Best Practice - Leptospirosis

A BPCA Code of Best Practice is a set of written rules which explains how people working in our industry should behave in a particular situation. It encompasses relevant legislation, but is not law in itself. However, were a member to act outside of the norms outlined in the COBP, they may be subject to disciplinary action and/or be in breach of legislation. Members must abide by Codes of Best Practice in their day-to-day work. Failure to do so may result in disciplinary action up to and including dismissal from the Association.

You and your company should have procedures in place to prevent the spread of Leptospirosis to technicians and staff members. All companies involved in rodent pest control treatments should ensure that protective equipment is provided for technicians, such as appropriate gloves, hand washing/wiping facilities and first aid kits stocked with waterproof plasters. Your company should also ensure that service staff receive appropriate training to avoid rodent borne disease.

Related Legislation

- Health and Safety at Work Act 1974
- Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999
- Personal Protective Equipment Regulations 2002
- Health Protection (Notification) Regulations 2012

Leptospirosis (Weil's disease)

Leptospirosis is termed a zoonosis – an infection that can be transmitted from animals to humans. Leptospirosis is caused by spiral-shaped bacteria of the genus *Leptospira* that infect a variety of both wild and domestic animals. There are over 200 variations of leptospirosis that effect different species of animals. Once infected the animal can then spread the infection via their urine.

Nearly all mammals are capable of carrying the bacteria and can therefore transmit the disease amongst their own kind, to other species, and ultimately on to man. Common animal reservoirs (hosts) include rodents, cattle and pigs.

Infection can be acquired by direct or indirect contact with an infected animals urine, tissues or secretions, or via water contaminated with infected animal urine. Leptospirosis can enters the body through cut or damaged skin, through the mucous membrane, and through the eyes. Person to person contamination is rare, if it occurs at all.

Infection from Leptospirosis can present in a number of ways. Often the patient will have flu like symptoms that can rapidly deteriorate and can result in multiple organ failure and ultimately death.

The main groups at risk of contracting leptospirosis in the UK are farm workers, pest controllers, and people who have recreational contact with water such as canoeists, divers, fishermen and potholers. Leptospirosis can also be contracted abroad.

Incidents in the United Kingdom

In general, Leptospirosis is uncommon in the UK – there are usually less than 40 cases per year in England and Wales. However, Leptospirosis is a disease that requires statutory notification if contracted by a members of staff. Doctors in England and Wales have a statutory duty to notify a 'Proper Officer' of the Local Authority or the local Health Protection Unit of this particular infection. The Health Protection Agency are then notified.

Although cases are rare, pest controllers are in constant danger of contracting Leptospirosis in the UK, it can be a fatal disease. Preventative measures must be put in place to prevent pest controllers contracting the infection.

Prevention

There is no human vaccine available in the UK that is effective against Leptospirosis. Proactive management of rodent populations such as the removal of rubbish and the proofing of gaps will help reduce rodent numbers and make contraction of the infection less likely.

The risk of acquiring leptospirosis can be greatly reduced by carrying out a detailed risk assessment when treating rodent infestations. A thorough assessment will highlight risks such as wading through water that may be contaminated with animal urine when carrying out rodent control measures around river banks. If your staff are carrying out rodent treatments around fresh surface waters such as canals, ponds or rivers, a series of simple precautions will reduce the risk factors. Your staff must be trained to recognize the risk of disease and control them by;

- Covering cuts, scratches or sores with waterproof plasters.
- Cuts and abrasions that occur during treatments must be thoroughly cleaned.
- Appropriate protective clothing such as overalls, gloves/gauntlets and water resistant footwear must be available to staff.
- Staff must be informed of their responsibilities regarding the use of Protective equipment provided by their employer (failure to use correctly may negate any employer responsibility for disease transmission)
- If you are heavily contaminated with water in a treatment area, wash and shower at the earliest opportunity.
- Wear appropriate gloves issued by your employer whenever handling the bodies of dead rodents.
- Always thoroughly wash or wipe hands after treatments, especially before eating, drinking or smoking.
- Always carry a health information card advising that you work in the pest industry. These are available for members from the BPCA.

Further Reading

- Health Protection Agency – www.hpa.org.uk
- Leptospirosis Information Centre – www.leptospirosis.org