

# Q Fever

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is Q fever?

Q fever is a disease caused by a bacterium called *Coxiella burnetii*. This disease is found mostly in cattle, sheep, and goats but other kinds of animals can also have this disease. *C. burnetii* organisms are resistant to heat, drying, and many common disinfectants, and can survive for long periods in the environment.

### Who gets Q fever?

In the United States, most cases of Q fever are found in people who have occupational exposure to infected animals including veterinarians, meat processing plant workers, sheep and dairy workers, livestock farmers, and researchers at facilities housing sheep.

### How do people get Q fever?

People get Q fever by breathing (inhaling) contaminated dust with the *C. burnetii* bacteria. This dust contains animal droppings, urine, birth products (e.g., placenta, fetuses, amniotic fluid) from infected animals. A less common way of getting this disease includes drinking contaminated milk or getting tick bites.

### What are the symptoms of Q fever?

Only about half of all people infected with *C. burnetii* show any signs of clinical illness. Most patients who become ill do so within 2 to 3 weeks after they are exposed to the *C. burnetii* organism. People who are exposed to a greater numbers of the organism will develop symptoms quicker.

Symptoms of Q fever include sudden onset of one or more of the following:

- High fever
- Severe headache
- Muscle aches
- Confusion
- Sore throat
- Chills
- Sweats
- Dry cough
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Abdominal pain
- Weakness
- Chest pain

Fever usually lasts for 1 to 2 weeks. Weight loss can occur and last for some time. Most people will recover to good health within several months without any treatment. Chronic Q fever, characterized by infection that lasts for more than 6 months is uncommon but is a much more serious disease. A serious complication of chronic Q fever is endocarditis (inflammation of the heart, especially the heart valves).

Most infected animals do not show signs of Q fever.

### **How is Q fever diagnosed?**

If a health care provider suspects Q fever, samples of the patient's blood tests will be examined. The most important step to making a diagnosis is for the health care provider to take an occupational/environmental history that may suggest possible exposure to the *C. burnetti* organism.

### **What is the treatment for Q fever?**

Most people recover to good health within several months without any treatment. However, antibiotics may be used to shorten the duration of the illness. Antibiotic treatment is most effective when initiated within the first three days of illness. (NOTE: It is very important to finish your antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

### **Can people with Q fever pass the illness to others?**

People with Q fever are not infectious (able to pass the disease to others) and may attend work or school.

### **How can Q fever be prevented?**

- When possible, avoid contact with animal birth products (e.g., placenta, fetuses, amniotic fluid). Appropriately dispose of birth products.
- Eat and drink only pasteurized milk and milk products.
- Restrict access to barns and laboratories used in housing potentially infected animals.
- Quarantine imported animals.
- Ensure that holding facilities for sheep are located away from populated areas.
- Vaccinate people doing research with pregnant sheep and goats or working with live *C. burnetii* organisms.

### **Where can I get more information on Q fever?**

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health [www.nj.gov/health](http://www.nj.gov/health)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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