

# Kent County Health Department Tularemia Fact Sheet



What is tularemia?

Tularemia is a potentially serious illness that occurs naturally in the United States. It is caused by *Francisella tularensis*. It is a type of bacteria found in animals (especially rabbits, rodents and hares).

How do people get infected with the tularemia bacteria?

The most common ways people get tularemia are by:

- Being bitten by flies or ticks carrying the disease
- Handling infected animal tissue or fluids
- Eating undercooked rabbit meat

Other, less common, ways people can get tularemia are by:

- Having direct contact with or ingesting bacteria-contaminated water, food, or soil
- Touching contaminated animal skins
- Inhaling infective aerosols

What are the symptoms of tularemia?

Symptoms could include:

- Sudden fever
- Chills
- Headaches
- Diarrhea
- Muscle aches
- Joint pain
- Dry cough
- Weakness

In most patients, progressive weakness leads to a dry cough and pneumonia. Tularemia-induced pneumonia can cause

chest pain, bloody sputum, and trouble breathing. Depending on how a person was exposed to the bacteria, other symptoms may include:

- A red spot on the skin that enlarges to an ulcer
- Ulcers in the mouth
- Swollen and painful lymph glands
- Swollen and painful eyes
- Sore throat

How soon do infected people get sick?

Symptoms usually appear three to five days after exposure to the bacteria but can take as long as 14 days.

Can tularemia be spread from person to person?

No, tularemia is not known to be spread from person to person. Infected people do not need to be isolated.

How is tularemia treated?

Antibiotics are prescribed. Follow the directions given with your prescription to ensure the best possible result. Tell the doctor if you have any allergies to antibiotics.

Is there a tularemia vaccine?

A vaccine for tularemia is under review by the Food and Drug Administration but is not currently available in the United States. In a bioterrorism event, the vaccine may be made available.

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How can I prevent becoming infected with tularemia?

Tularemia occurs naturally in many parts of the United States especially the rural areas of the south-central and western states. Use insect repellent with DEET on your skin, or treat clothing with a repellent containing permethrin, to prevent insect bites. Wash your hands often, using soap and warm water, especially after handling animal carcasses. Be sure to cook your food thoroughly and that your water is from a safe source.

Can tularemia be used as a weapon?

Tularemia is very infectious. A tiny number (10-50 organisms) can cause illness. If tularemia were used as a weapon, the bacteria would likely be made airborne for exposure by inhalation. People who inhale an infectious aerosol would generally experience severe respiratory illness, including life-threatening pneumonia and systemic infection, if they are not treated. The bacteria that cause tularemia are common in nature and could be grown in quantity in a laboratory. However, making an effective aerosol weapon would require considerable sophistication.