

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

Information for the Public Regarding Tularemia

What is tularemia?

Tularemia is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Francisella tularensis*, and is considered to be one of the most infectious disease-causing bacteria known. *Francisella tularensis* may be found naturally throughout the world in a large number of different small animals, such as voles, mice, water rats, squirrels, beavers, rabbits, and hares, as well as water, moist soil, and hay/straw. Humans may become infected in many ways, including being bitten by infected animals, handling infected dead animals, and direct contact with contaminated water, soil, or food. Use of tularemia as a biological weapon would most likely occur as an aerosol release of the bacterium, although the potential for alternate delivery also exists. Tularemia is successfully treated with a variety of antibiotics.

What are the symptoms of tularemia?

- ✦ Symptoms occur suddenly: fever (100°-104°F), headache, chills, general body aches, and sore throat.
- ✦ Nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea occur sometimes; a dry or slightly productive cough and chest tightness may or may not be present.
- ✦ Continued fever and chills accompanied by sweating, fatigue, progressive weakness, loss of appetite, and weight loss signal continuation of the disease.

How soon after exposure would symptoms begin?

Symptoms generally develop between 3 and 5 days after exposure, but possibly as long as 14 days following exposure.

Can tularemia be spread person to person?

Tularemia is not spread from person to person.

How likely is it that I will be exposed to tularemia?

Historically, the last reported case of tularemia in West Virginia occurred in 1969. It is thought that use of tularemia as a weapon is unlikely. Hunters and others working with animals may be exposed to this disease.

How could an intentional release of tularemia be managed?

Early recognition by physicians is key to managing this disease. Infected patients can be treated with antibiotics, and exposed individuals may take antibiotics to prevent disease.