

# Leptospirosis

*Published 15 December 2020*

The HSE has recently published guidance on controlling exposure to a type of leptospirosis called Weil's Disease. In this alert we look at how construction workers in particular may be at risk of developing the disease.

Weil's disease is a form of a bacterial infection that is carried by animals, most commonly in rats. It can be caught by humans through contact with rat urine, usually through contaminated fresh water. The bacteria gets into the body through cuts and scratches or through the lining of the mouth, throat and eyes after contact with infected urine or contaminated water. The disease starts with flu-like symptoms such as a headache or muscle pains. More severe cases can lead to meningitis, kidney failure and other serious conditions. In rare cases the disease can be fatal. Although human infection in the UK is minimal it is advisable that employers assess the risk and take preventative measures to decrease the possibility of employees contracting the disease.

The risk of Weil's disease is linked to areas where rats are or have been present. This is most likely to be during refurbishment or demolition work, where rat infestation may be a particular issue. Other potential situations include work linked to canals, rivers, ponds or sewers, or indeed construction work being carried out in the vicinity of these areas.

Employers have a duty under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 ("COSHH") to assess the risks to employees health. Employers should ensure that a risk assessment is carried out when employees will be undertaking work in areas known to have rat populations.

In addition to carrying out a risk assessment, employers should take steps to control the risk by encouraging employees to:

- Wear gloves when handling materials and working in known rat infested areas;
- Follow good basic hygiene including providing washing facilities to enable regular hand washing and when facilities are not available, providing hand sanitiser and/or wipes;
- Avoid hand to mouth/eye contact;
- Take rest breaks away from the work area and to clean their hands before eating or drinking;
- Wash cuts and grazes immediately with soap and running water;
- Cover all cuts, abrasions and other breaks in the skin with waterproof dressings and/or gloves.

Whilst Weil's disease is a rare condition in the UK employers should be live to this risk. If an employee were to develop the disease and it is found that adequate control measures were not in place, this is likely to lead to a substantial claim for damages being made against the employer.

Furthermore, in light of the HSE guidance, the HSE may well take the opportunity during any inspections to ask companies for details of the systems they have in place for controlling the risks and will not hesitate to take enforcement action where appropriate, especially where an employee has developed the disease due to a breach of the COSHH Regulations.

## Authors



**Jonathan Mitchell**

London - Walbrook  
+44 (0)20 7894 6895  
[jmitchell@dacbeachcroft.com](mailto:jmitchell@dacbeachcroft.com)



**Chris Baranowski**

Leeds  
+44 (0) 113 251 4842  
[cbaranowski@dacbeachcroft.com](mailto:cbaranowski@dacbeachcroft.com)