LEPTOSPIROSIS & WEIL'S DISEASE

Guidance sheet for information

What is it ?

Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection carried in rat's urine that may contaminate water in lakes, rivers and so forth. The bacteria do not survive long in dry conditions or salt water. The risk of infection is greater in stagnant or slow-moving water (for example, canals) but cases have occurred in swift moving streams and lowland rivers. There is an enhanced risk where flash floods have washed out rat runs.

The infection is caught by direct contact with the urine or polluted environment. Bacteria enter through skin abrasions or via eyes, nose or mouth.

The usual incubation is 2 to 12 days. Often an influenza-like illness occurs which resolves in 2-3 weeks. There may be fever, severe headache, pains in the back and calf and prostration. A few cases develop jaundice, when the condition is known as Weil's Disease.

The Level of Risk

Each year only a handful of all waterways users contract Leptospirosis. It is very rare and its deterioration into Weil's disease rarer still. However, Weil's Disease is a serious illness and must be swiftly diagnosed and treated. Death may occur in about 15% of Weil's disease cases (i.e. jaundiced patients) but death without jaundice is virtually unknown. Antibiotics during the first few days help in limiting infection. Many cases recover without specific treatment.

How to prevent it

* Cover all cuts and abrasions with waterproof plasters.
* Wear suitable footwear and avoid cutting the feet.
* Avoid contact with water in suspect environments.
* Where possible shower soon after immersion or contact with suspected water.
* If in doubt, or if suffering from any illness (especially one involving flu-like symptoms) following contact with suspected water then seek a Doctor's advice immediately and inform of possible risk of exposure.

What to do if infection is suspected

Anyone suspecting they may be infected should visit their Doctor as soon as possible and explain there may be a risk of Leptospirosis. Blood tests can rarely confirm the illness in time to affect treatment but are needed to subsequently confirm it.