

## Fact sheet

# Tularemia (Rabbit fever)

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### What is tularemia?

Tularemia is an illness caused by a bacteria, *Francisella tularensis*, which can affect both animals and humans. Most cases occur during the summer months when deer flies and ticks are abundant and the early winter months during rabbit hunting season. During hunting season, illness usually results from skinning infected rabbits.

### How is tularemia spread?

The most common way tularemia is spread is by the bite of an infected blood sucking insect such as a deer fly or tick. Another way people get tularemia is by getting blood or tissue from infected animals (especially rabbits) in their eyes, mouth, or in cuts or scratches on the skin. Tularemia can also be spread by handling or eating rabbit meat that is not cooked well. Drinking contaminated water or breathing dust containing the bacteria can also spread tularemia. Person to person spread does not occur.

### What are the signs and symptoms of tularemia?

The usual symptoms of tularemia are fever, chills, headache, muscle aches, chest pain, and coughing. If tularemia is caused by the bite of an infected insect or from bacteria entering a cut or scratch, it usually causes a skin ulcer and swollen glands. Eating or drinking food or water containing the bacteria may produce a throat infection, stomach pain, diarrhea, and

vomiting. Breathing dust containing the bacteria may cause a pneumonia-like illness.

### How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may appear between 2 and 10 days, most often within 3 to 5 days.

### Who is most at risk?

Anyone can get tularemia if they spend time outdoors in areas where infected animals, deer flies or ticks, can be found. Rabbit hunters, trappers, and laboratory workers exposed to the bacteria are at higher risk.

### How is tularemia treated?

Antibiotics such as streptomycin and gentamicin are used to treat tularemia.

### How can tularemia be prevented?

- Persons at risk should reduce chances for insect bites by wearing protective clothing, and by searching for ticks often and removing attached ticks immediately. Tick/insect repellents containing "DEET" provide additional protection. Permethrin is also helpful when sprayed onto clothing.
- Children should be discouraged from handling sick or dead rabbits, or other possibly infected animals.
- Gloves should be worn when skinning or handling animals, especially wild rabbits.

- Wild rabbit meat should be thoroughly cooked.
- Face masks, gowns, and rubber gloves should be worn by those working with cultures or infective material in a laboratory.

### Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- Your [local health department](#)
- [Utah Department of Health and Human Services](#)
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#)