

Leptospirosis / Weil's Disease

What it is

Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection carried in rat's urine which may contaminate water in rivers. The bacteria does not survive long in dry conditions or salt water. The risk of infection is greater in stagnant or slow-moving water but cases have occurred in 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. Usually a 'flu' 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 an average of 3 canoeists contract Leptospirosis. It is very rare and its deterioration into Weil's disease even more rare. Weil's disease is however, 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 and treat it

- Do not drink the river water
- Cover all cuts and abrasions with waterproof plasters
- Always wear footwear to avoid cutting the feet
- Wash your hands with soap and water before eating. Be aware that if you eat or drink whilst on the river, you may transfer bacteria into your mouth.
- Where possible shower soon after canoeing and/or wash hands
- If you suspect illness contact your doctor early. Tell the doctor you have been in the river and the water may have been contaminated. Blood tests will be carried out to confirm infection and antibiotics may be issued.