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Tularaemia - cause of NSW wildlife deaths: information for wildlife carers and handlers

Current Issue

- Tularaemia (Francisella tularensis) has been confirmed for the first time in Australian animals.
- A new method of testing has resulted in a diagnosis of tularaemia (Francisella tularensis) infection in two ringtail possums that died in separate clusters in 2002 and 2003.
- This finding is not unexpected given that there have been reported human cases of tularaemia in Australia, including one case in Darwin in 2003 and two separate cases in Tasmania from 2011.

Worldwide, tularaemia can affect a wide range of mammals including rabbits, hares, rodents and wildlife. It may cause acute blood poisoning (septicaemia) and sudden death in these species.

Overseas, tularaemia has been shown to spread to humans who have direct contact with sick animals, direct contact with water or tissues contaminated by sick animals or via tick or other insect bites. For information on symptoms in humans please refer to the NSW Health factsheet.

Advice to wildlife carers and handlers re sick or dead wildlife

Tularaemia may cause infection in humans but this is extremely rare in Australia.

- Avoid direct contact with dead wildlife.
- Minimise handling of sick wildlife.
- Wear gloves when handling wildlife and make sure the animal is well restrained.
- Cover cuts and abrasions with a waterproof dressing.
- Wash and dry hands after handling animals.
- Do not eat or smoke while handling animals. Wash and dry hands before eating or smoking.
- For advice on sick animals contact a private veterinarian.

Reporting unusual signs of disease or death in wildlife

For advice on sick animals contact a private veterinarian.

To report unusual signs of disease or death in wildlife:

- Contact your state Wildlife Health Coordinator, or
- Ring the emergency animal disease hotline on 1800 675 888.

Signs of tularaemia in animals

- Signs of tularaemia in animals are vague and vary between animals.
- Tularaemia may present as a mass die off event in wildlife such as ringtail possums, rabbits and hares.
For advice on human health

- If you have any concerns regarding your health or the health of other people in-contact with the suspect animal contact your GP or your local public health unit on 1300 066 055 and tell them that you have had contact with a sick animal.

Further Information

- Wildlife Health Australia- Tularaemia and Australian wildlife fact sheet
- WHO Guidelines on Tularaemia
- NSW Health Tularaemia Factsheet
- DPI webpage on wildlife health and disease

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Disclaimer: The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing (05 October 2016). However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of NSW Department Primary Industries or the user’s independent adviser.