

TULAREMIA

Polk County Preparations

Because of ongoing concerns about potential terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is working to improve overall preparation against terrorism. One aspect of preparation is to learn more about protecting ourselves against possible attacks with biological agents.

If a public health emergency happens in our community, the Polk County Public Health Department will be the local agency responsible for preparing and guiding medical response and public information efforts. During such an emergency, a critical role of the Public Health Department will be to work with other local first responders, such as fire and police. The Public Health Department will also coordinate response activities with state and federal agencies.

The Polk County Public Health Department is providing this information to help you understand what tularemia is and what response you may be asked to take in the unlikely event that you would be exposed to the agent that causes tularemia.

What is Tularemia?

Tularemia is a disease caused by the highly infectious bacterium *Francisella tularensis*. It is typically found in animals, especially rodents and rabbits. In nature, cases of tularemia are caused when a person is bitten by a tick, biting fly or other insect that was infected by feeding on an animal with the disease. It can also be spread by handling the carcasses of infected animals, eating or drinking contaminated food or water, or breathing in the bacteria. The disease is not spread from person to person.

Tularemia and Bioterrorism

Although tularemia is a widespread disease in certain animals, it can also be produced in a laboratory and has been considered as a possible weapon of war for many years. Tularemia can be made into a gas or mist that could be dispersed into the air and spread over wide areas. The danger is that people who breathe in tularemia bacteria would experience severe breathing problems including life-threatening pneumonia.

In the event of a bioterrorist attack with tularemia, the Public Health Department and emergency officials will provide emergency information and instructions on how to protect yourself and your family. You may be asked to evacuate (leave the area) or shelter-in-place (remain inside a building). In either case, it is important that you and your family have an Emergency Preparation Plan.

Symptoms of Tularemia

Depending on how a person is exposed to the bacteria, symptoms and signs of tularemia can include ulcers on the skin or mouth, swollen lymph glands and swollen eyes. If tularemia bacteria are inhaled, symptoms of the disease can include sudden chills and fever, headache and muscle aches, joint pain, diarrhea, a dry cough, chest pain and difficulty breathing. Tularemia symptoms usually occur from 3 to 5 days after being exposed to the disease but can occur from 1 to 14 days after exposure.

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Treatment for Tularemia

In the unlikely event that tularemia bacteria were used as a weapon of bio-terrorists, the most critical step is to get away as quickly as possible from the area where a release of the bacteria is suspected. If you were exposed to tularemia through the air as an aerosol or spray, you would remove your clothing and wash your entire body with soap and water as quickly as possible.

You would then seek medical attention immediately and begin treatment as quickly as possible. You would be provided supportive medical care for relief of symptoms. Several types of antibiotics can be effective in treating tularemia infections. A vaccine to prevent tularemia is not currently available.

If you have any questions about tularemia, please contact the **Polk County Health Department at 515-286-3798**. Public Health Department staff members are available to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information about putting together an Emergency Preparation Plan, visit the Department of Homeland Security site at www.ready.gov. Also, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at www.bt.cdc.gov for additional information.

