

# Brucellosis

There are a number of diseases found in animals that can be transmitted to humans. These diseases are called **zoonoses**. Zoonoses are caused by particular disease causing organisms such as bacteria and viruses and by worms and parasites. Any person involved in handling animals or animal products is potentially at risk of infection.

## What is Brucellosis?

Brucellosis is an infectious disease found in animals that can be transmitted to humans. It is caused by a bacterium called *brucella* found mainly in cattle and pigs. Thus it is an occupational hazard faced by individuals employed in meat industries.

Brucellosis is also known as Ungulant Fever and may be difficult to diagnose in exposed workers and may not always be reported.

Any one who has a history of contact with domestic cattle may have risked exposure to Brucellosis. Workers most at risk are those in animal production and marketing, abattoir workers, meat workers and handlers.

## How is Brucellosis transmitted?

In Australia, the disease is transmitted to people from infected cattle or pigs that usually get the disease by eating contaminated fodder or pasture. The main sources that can transmit infection to workers are fetuses ("slinks"), placenta, birth fluids, joint swellings of infected pregnant cows, milk and udder of infected lactating cows.

Transmission usually occurs by direct skin contact with these animal tissues or by inhalation of infective droplets and dust. **The brucella bacteria can penetrate intact skin.**

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of brucellosis can be similar to those of the common cold. It is characterised by fluctuating fever, headache, sweating, weakness, muscular pains and depression. These signs occur two to four weeks after infection has occurred. These acute symptoms usually lessen within a few weeks but the patient may suffer relapses and can be chronically ill for several years.

## Treatment

If a doctor gives the appropriate antibiotic treatment, recovery from brucellosis can usually be prompt; however, relapses may still occur.

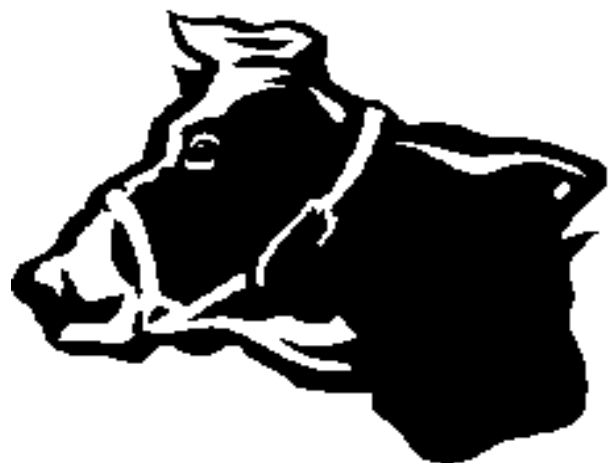
## What you can do

Due to the non-specific nature of the symptoms, people with brucellosis infection may be misdiagnosed. Occupationally exposed groups, such as abattoir workers, are therefore advised to see a doctor regarding any illness no matter how mild.

It is further recommended that the occupation of the worker is specifically included in their medical record so that zoonoses are considered in any diagnosis. Occupationally exposed groups should have access to specialised medical services that can ensure that a correct and early diagnosis of brucellosis can be made.

## Preventing infection

Preventive measures that are well understood by workers should be implemented in workplaces to eliminate brucella infection. Some of the control measures recom-



mended by the National Occupational Health & Safety Commission (see *Diseases acquired from animals*, AGPS, 1989) to prevent and manage brucellosis include:

- All workers handling potentially infected animals should be thoroughly informed regarding the danger of contracting brucellosis.
- Individuals with uncovered wounds should not be permitted to work in a meat handling area.
- Trucks taking cattle and pigs to abattoirs should be regularly disinfected.
- Specific work practices should be followed in slaughtering animals that have reacted to diagnostic tests for brucellosis. (*For information regarding safe work practices, consult the occupational health and safety officer at work or your union office*).
- Protective clothing and equipment, such as face masks, goggles, gloves and waterproof boots should be available and used where necessary.
- All utensils, instruments, machinery, chutes, floors and other areas of potential contamination should be cleaned as frequently as possible with approved agents.

**For further information and advice contact the Workers Health Centre**



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