Yersinia Fact Sheet (District)

What is yersiniosis?
Yersiniosis is an infection of the bowel or blood caused by the yersinia bacteria.

What are the symptoms?
Symptoms include:
- diarrhoea
- stomach pains (often severe and can be confused with appendicitis)
- nausea
- vomiting
- headache
- fever
- joint pain, in some cases

These symptoms may develop between 1 and 11 days (usually 3-7 days) after contact with the bacteria. The symptoms may last 2-3 days but it can be up to 3 weeks.

How is it treated?
There is no specific treatment for most cases. Drink plenty of fluids while the diarrhoea lasts to prevent dehydration. Go back to your doctor if symptoms are severe as they may give further advice. In some cases, antibiotic treatment may be recommended to relieve symptoms or if you have other health problems.

How is it spread?
People become infected when they swallow the bacteria. This can happen as a result of:

- Eating food that has been contaminated or poorly handled. Yersinia has been found in pork and other meat products, dairy products (such as unpasteurised milk), fruit, vegetables, tofu, pastries and sandwiches.

- Drinking from an untreated water supply (e.g. tank or bore water). Infected animals can contaminate drinking water collected from roofs, creeks, lakes and streams.

- Contact with infected people.

- Contact with infected household pets (particularly sick puppies or kittens), farm animals (especially pigs) and birds.
How do you prevent the spread of infection to others?

Infected people might feel well, but they can be infectious for up to 2-3 weeks after their symptoms have gone. The risk of spreading the infection to others is greatly reduced if special attention is given to personal hygiene. In particular, washing your hands:

- before handling food and eating.
- after playing or working with pets or animals.
- after going to the toilet and changing nappies.
- after coming into contact with a sick person or animal.

The following can also help to prevent the spread of infection:

- Store all raw meat separate from other food and on a bottom shelf in the refrigerator.
- Use a separate cutting board for preparing raw meat. After contact with raw meat, clean knives, cutting boards and surfaces with hot water and detergent, or use a dishwasher.
- Thaw frozen meat in the refrigerator or defrost in the microwave.
- Prepare food in a hygienic manner - use clean utensils, cutting boards and benches.
- Cook all food thoroughly, especially pork. Minced meat and sausages should be cooked right through and pork and poultry juices should run clear not pink.
- Reheat leftovers until steaming hot throughout and do not reheat more than once.
- Use pasteurised milk and milk products.
- Wash fruit and vegetables with safe water.
- If you have your own water supply, protect it from animal and bird faeces. It may be necessary to disinfect the supply, such as by chlorination. Boil water if you are unsure whether the water is safe to drink or use in food preparation.
- People who have recently had yersiniosis should not donate blood for at least three months because the bacteria can be spread through infected blood.

When can I return to school or work?

Anyone with diarrhoea, even if the reason is not known, should not go to work, school or preschool.

Children should stay away from pre-school until they have been symptom-free for 48 hours. If you are a parent of a sick child, you are advised to contact the school or pre-school supervisor before your child returns. This enables them to meet the requirements of the school/centre's sickness policy.

If you work in a job that involves preparing food, working at a pre-school or in health care, you should not go back to work until after you have been symptom-free for 48 hours. Any person at a higher risk of spreading yersinia due to an underlying condition or disability should also not go back to work or school until after they have been symptom free for 48 hours.

For further information, contact a health protection officer located at Public Health South offices (please refer to front page)