

Occupational Lung Disease – Q fever



Occupational lung diseases are conditions of the respiratory system caused by workplace exposure to dusts, gases, fumes, vapours, mists and microorganisms.

What is Q fever?

Q fever is a disease caused by the bacteria *Coxiella burnetii*. The bacteria can infect domestic and wild animals and can also be found in animal birth products, urine, and faeces of infected animals.

The bacteria can survive in the environment for long periods of time.

What causes Q fever?

Workers can develop Q fever by breathing in the *Coxiella burnetii* bacteria that is in the air or dust when they work around infected domestic and wild animals. Cattle, sheep and goats are the main sources of infection; however, a wide range of animals including domestic and feral dogs and cats, pigs, horses, rabbits, rodents, alpacas, camels, llamas, foxes and native Australian wildlife can spread the bacteria to humans.

Who is at risk of Q fever?

A wide range of agricultural workers may be exposed to Q fever such as livestock and dairy farmers and farm workers, abattoir and meat workers, shearers and wool classers, veterinarians and veterinary nurses, and animal breeders.

What are the symptoms of Q fever?

The symptoms of Q fever vary and range from mild symptoms to a severe flu-like illness. Symptoms begin about 2-3 weeks after coming into contact with the bacteria. People may also develop:

- hepatitis (inflammation of the liver)
- pneumonia (lung infection)
- chronic infections such as endocarditis (inflammation of the lining of the heart)
- chronic-fatigue syndrome.

Infection during pregnancy may cause miscarriage or the baby being born prematurely.



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What you should do as a PCBU?

PCBUs must eliminate the risks of Q fever or if this is not reasonably practicable, minimise the risks so far as is reasonably practicable.

The Q-vax vaccination provides a high level of protection against Q fever. It is recommended that workers at risk of contracting Q fever are immunised. PCBUs should provide access to the vaccination to their workers, and those at risk.

Note: before getting the vaccination, people must be tested to ensure they are not already immune to Q fever to avoid a reaction to the vaccination.

References:

<https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/q-fever.aspx>

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/conditionsandtreatments/q-fever>

Further information:

Under the model WHS Regulations, PCBUs have specific duties to eliminate the risks to health and safety so far as is reasonably practicable. If it is not reasonably practicable to do so, PCBUs must minimise those risks so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes the risks of contracting diseases caused by microorganisms, including the bacteria that causes Q fever. Contact your [WHS regulator](#) to find out the laws that apply in your state or territory.