

PRESS RELEASE

ECDC Risk Assessment on Q fever

Stockholm, 24 May 2010

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) today releases a risk assessment providing a summary of the best available scientific evidence for Q fever in Europe. ECDC developed this risk assessment at the request of the European Commission, which was initiated due to the high number of Q fever cases observed in the Netherlands over the last couple of years. The aim of the risk assessment is to clarify the implications for public health.

Q fever, caused by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*, often develops as outbreaks, mainly in the vicinity of sheep or goat farming activities. The bacteria is transmitted from animals to humans by airborne transmission and can cause an acute form of flu-like disease, which is usually self-limited.

If the acute disease is not treated Q fever occasionally evolves into a more serious chronic disease, especially among people with underlying health conditions, such as heart valve disease, vessel grafts, cancer, or compromised immune system and it can be fatal without treatment.

Johan Giesecke, Chief Scientist at ECDC says; *"The main conclusion of the report is that chronic Q fever can be a serious disease. Since the acute infection can be mild and unspecific, it is easily overlooked, both by the patient and by the physician, and the evidence suggests that chronic Q fever is often under diagnosed and underreported."*

The management of Q-fever is the responsibility of national authorities and the report aims to provide an additional assessment of the best available evidence and suggests possible interventions to prevent and control Q fever. ECDC Chief Scientist, Johan Giesecke adds; *"Early detection and correct treatment for both acute and chronic infection is essential and health authorities must work together with veterinary authorities at a national and a local level to be able to take necessary actions to stop an outbreak."*

The report states that preventing and controlling the acute form of Q fever can be addressed by various strategies such as public awareness campaigns to make patients and doctors more observant of mild or unspecific symptoms, measures to limit Q fever bacteria in the environment and to limit contact with possibly infected animals.

The present outbreak seems largely limited to the southern parts of the Netherlands, but since the bacteria can spread over considerable distances, the risk in neighbouring countries cannot be neglected.

The ECDC risk assessment has been developed in close collaboration with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to provide decision-makers with integrated European-level advice on Q fever covering both human and animal health, as well as the transmission of the disease from animals to humans.

Notes to editors

Q fever is a zoonotic disease, i.e. a disease that can spread from animals to humans. It mainly affects sheep and goats, but causes little symptoms in them, apart from an increased frequency of spontaneous abortions. It spreads from the animals to humans via air. Airborne transmission includes long-distance transmission of the aerosolized bacteria and close transmission through inhalation of droplets, aerosols, and dust during contact with infected animals, contaminated animal products (e.g. wool, straw), and contaminated clothing. An association between the force of transmission to humans and environmental factors, i.e. wind speed, dry weather conditions, and vegetation density, has been established. The risk of infection is highest in close proximity (a 5 km range) from the anticipated source.

What is an ECDC risk assessment?

Producing a risk assessment is part of ECDC's mandate and it does this for many communicable diseases. It is also a useful way of pulling together all that is known about the threat and highlighting areas of uncertainties.

According to the founding regulation of ECDC, Regulation (EC) No 851/2004i

ECDC shall:

Art 9(2), 'the Centre may be requested by the Commission, the Member States, third countries and international organisations (in particular the WHO) to provide scientific or technical assistance in any field within its mission. Scientific and technical assistance provided by the Centre shall be based on evidence-based science and technology.'

Full report -

http://ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications/Publications/1005_TER_Risk_Assessment_Qfever.pdf

Press information:

Press office

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

Tel.: +46 (0)8 586 01 678

E-mail: press@ecdc.europa.eu

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (www.ecdc.europa.eu)

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) is an EU agency tasked with identifying assessing and communicating threats to human health posed by infectious diseases. It supports the work of public health authorities in the EU and EEA/EFTA Member States.

