

Leishmaniasis

What is leishmaniasis and what causes it?

Leishmaniasis (LESH-ma-NIGH-ah-sis) is a disease caused by a protozoan parasite called *Leishmania*. The parasite is transmitted to humans and animals through the bite of an infected sandfly. The disease can have several different forms; the two most common forms affect the skin or internal organs.

Leishmaniasis occurs in many countries of the world (Central and South America, the Mediterranean, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, China, India, the Caribbean). Cases in the United States are rare and typically occurred in individuals returning from countries that have the disease and sand flies. However, sand flies capable of spreading the disease have been found in southern Texas and leishmaniasis has been reported in 21 states and Canada.

What animals get leishmaniasis?

Dogs (especially foxhounds in the eastern part of the United States), coyotes, foxes, and rodents can be affected and harbor the parasite. Cats and horses can occasionally become infected.

How can my animal get leishmaniasis?

Animals get infected from the bite of a sandfly (**vector**) that has previously fed on blood from another infected animal.

How does leishmaniasis affect my animal?

Dogs develop the skin form of the disease and may have non-itchy, dry, flaky, hairless areas on the muzzle, around the eyes, ears or on the feet. Lesions may start on the footpads and then spread to the rest of the body. Other signs can be fever, loss of energy, appetite and weight, and exercise intolerance.

Can I get leishmaniasis?

Yes. Humans can get leishmaniasis, but not directly from animals. Transmission occurs from the bite of an infected sandfly (**vector**). Animals serve as a reservoir (or source of the protozoan for the sandflies). Most cases occur when people travel to areas where the disease occurs. Signs of disease can take months to develop and may affect the skin or the internal organs of the body.

Disease of the skin starts with itchy, red raised bumps which can ulcerate and scab. They usually heal on their own but can last for years and cause permanent scars.

When the internal organs are involved, it can affect the spleen, liver, or cause changes to the blood. This form can be very serious if not treated and may lead to death. This form rarely occurs in the United States.

Who should I contact, if I suspect leishmaniasis?

In Animals –

Contact your veterinarian.

In Humans –

Contact your physician.

How can I protect my animal from leishmaniasis?

Pets, especially dogs, living in areas where sandflies exist, should be kept indoors from dusk until dawn (to avoid being bitten by the insects). Rodent populations should be controlled to decrease a source of the protozoan for the sandfly.

How can I protect myself from leishmaniasis?

If travelling to areas where leishmaniasis and sandflies occur, limit outdoor activities from dusk until dawn. If you are outside, wear protective clothing (long sleeves and pants). Use insect repellents containing DEET. If sleeping outside, use mosquito netting. Make sure windows and doors have screens that are in good repair.

For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. Leishmaniasis at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/default.htm>

CDC website. Leishmaniasis. <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/leishmaniasis/>

