Leptospirosis occurs worldwide but is most common in temperate or tropical climates. It is an occupational hazard for many people who work outdoors or with animals, including farmers, veterinarians, meat workers, dairy farmers, and military personnel. It is a recreational hazard for campers, or those who participate in outdoor sports in contaminated areas, and has been associated with swimming, wading, and white water rafting.

Leptospirosis is a bacterial disease that affects humans and animals. It is caused by bacteria of the genus Leptospira. In humans, it causes a wide range of symptoms, and some infected persons may have no symptoms at all. Symptoms of leptospirosis include high fever, severe headache, chills, muscle aches, and vomiting, and may include jaundice, red eyes, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, or a rash. Many of these symptoms can be mistaken for other diseases. If the disease is not treated, the patient could develop kidney damage, meningitis, liver failure, and respiratory distress. The illness lasts from a few days to 3 weeks or longer and is treated with antibiotics. In rare cases, death occurs.

Outbreaks of leptospirosis are usually caused by exposure to water contaminated with the urine of infected animals. Many different kinds of animals carry the bacterium; they may become sick but sometimes have no symptoms. Leptospira organisms have been found in cattle, pigs, horses, dogs, rodents, and wild animals, including marine mammals. Humans become infected through contact with water, food, or soil containing urine from these infected animals. This may happen by swallowing contaminated food or water or through skin contact, especially with mucosal surfaces such as the eyes or nose, or with broken skin.

For further information please contact the WHO/FAO/OIE Collaborating Centre for Reference and Research on Leptospirosis on (07) 3274 9054 or (07) 3274 9061, or refer to www.health.qld.gov.au/qhcss/lepto.asp