

Q fever prevention

Provides information for employers about preventing the transmission of Q fever in the workplace. Employees and members of the public who are at risk of contracting Q fever may also find this information useful.

2015

Query fever, commonly known as 'Q fever', is an infectious disease that is typically transmitted to humans from infected farm animals (such as cattle, sheep and goats), infected domestic animals (such as cats or dog) or infected wild animals (such as kangaroos).

Transmission of the disease can be through direct or indirect contact with tissue and/or by-products of infected animals. Some examples include:

- inhaling airbourne particles (such as dust) contaminated by faeces, urine or birth products
- drinking infected unpasteurised milk
- handling placentas (eg separating the foetus from the placenta).

For more information about Q fever (including symptoms), please refer to the publications listed under 'Further Information'.

Some examples of who may be at risk of contracting Q fever include:

- abattoir workers
- farm and dairy workers
- stockyard workers
- livestock transporters
- sheep shearers, wool classers, pelt and hide processors
- veterinary personnel
- people who work with raw animal products, particularly reproductive organs including laboratory personnel
- workers involved in rendering
- council/road workers who collect road kill
- administration and maintenance workers at Q fever risk workplaces, visitors to these workplaces and members of the public who are near these workplaces.

Key legal obligations for employers

Under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* (OHS Act) you have a duty to provide and maintain a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health of your employees and contractors. You also have a duty to ensure that other persons (such as visitors and members of the public) are not exposed to health and safety risks by the conduct of your business, so far as is reasonably practicable.

As an employer, you must consult with employees when identifying health and safety risks at the workplace and deciding on appropriate risk control measures (such as measures to prevent Q fever). For more information about consultation, please refer to WorkSafe publication, [Consultation on health and safety - A handbook for workplaces](#).

There may be circumstances where you are required to notify WorkSafe Victoria about incidents relating to Q fever that occur in your workplace. For example, you are required to let WorkSafe know if one of your employees contracts Q fever and requires treatment as an in-patient in hospital. See worksafe.vic.gov for more information about notifiable incidents.

How can the risk of Q fever be managed?

If your workplace is at risk of Q fever, risk control measures must be made available for your employees, contractors and other people who may be exposed to the disease.

Eliminate or reduce the risk of employees and other persons contracting Q fever at or from your workplace by implementing a pre-screening and vaccination program, utilising a particular workplace design, and using safe work practices. These are discussed in more detail below.

To control the risk of Q fever transmission you should also ensure all persons (including employees, contractors, visitors, sales representatives, buyers, council workers, essential service workers and members of the public) show proof of immunity status to Q fever before being allowed entry into your workplace.

Where a person cannot demonstrate Q fever immunity, employers should refuse that person entry into their workplace. The Q fever register a qfever.org can provide further information regarding a person's immunity status.

1. Pre-screening and vaccination

WorkSafe regards Q fever vaccination as a high order risk control measure to eliminate the risk of contracting Q fever.

A Q fever pre-screening and vaccination program might include:

- a) screening new employees during induction
- b) if their eligible, ensuring they are vaccinated before starting at the workplace
- c) after immunity is established ie 15 days after the vaccination (not after the initial skin 'prick' test during screening), having them commence in high Q fever risk work areas.

You should ensure all your employees without Q fever immunity status undergo pre-screening by a registered Q fever Vaccine Provider to determine their eligibility to be vaccinated (some people may be immune from past exposure to Q fever or may be likely to develop unpleasant side effects from the vaccine).

Eligible persons

The vaccination process should only be done by doctors registered as Q fever Vaccine Providers. The Australian Q fever Register at qfever.org maintains a list of trained medical practitioners for Q fever vaccination services.

Ineligible persons

Where an employee is not immune to Q fever and either declines or is otherwise ineligible to be vaccinated following medical advice, you should implement the following risk control measures:

- provide respiratory protection (P2 respirator)
- provide appropriate personal protective clothing (eg overalls/coat and rubber boots)
- encourage appropriate personal hygiene procedures
- only allow the person access to the low risk Q fever work areas.

People under the age of 15 and pregnant women should consult with a registered Q fever Vaccine Provider for further information regarding their eligibility for the Q fever vaccination.

2. Workplace design

You should identify high risk work areas where employees are more likely to be exposed to Q fever, such as:

- kill floors
- livestock transport vehicles
- yards and pens
- offal rooms
- skin sheds
- rendering areas
- handling foetal calves (eg slink rooms).

Install appropriate ventilation and dust suppression systems in these areas to help reduce dust and other airborne particles

from spreading. Ventilation systems should have the intake and exhaust vents separated to prevent recirculation of contaminated air.

Also provide appropriate washing and changing facilities near these areas to avoid cross-contamination.

3. Safe work practices

You should implement safe work practices, such as those below, to help eliminate or reduce the risk of Q fever transmission:

- Provide necessary information, instruction, training and supervision about Q fever to enable your employees to perform their work in a way that is safe and without risks to health.
- Arrange for personal clothing to be stored away from any work clothing that may be contaminated (work clothing should not be taken out of the workplace to prevent Q fever exposure to others outside the workplace).
- Prohibit eating, drinking, smoking, and nail-biting in animal holding or processing areas. Require employees to thoroughly wash their hands before eating, drinking, smoking in designated areas, before going to the toilet and at the end of each shift (to prevent Q fever exposure to others outside the workplace).
- Clean and disinfect work areas regularly and ensure drainage is adequate.
- Decompose (soda ash) and bury animal by-products that are not suitable for processing.
- Pasteurise or boil milk.
- Implement an appropriate first aid program to ensure employees with open wounds are treated quickly.
- Muzzle dogs that are used to move livestock to prevent cross contamination.
- Implement an ongoing maintenance program (eg routine inspection of ventilation and drainage systems and wash facilities etc).

In the meat industry, the risk of Q fever transmission can be further minimised by:

- training staff with appropriate knife skills to minimise damage to the udder and the rectum to reduce potentially contaminated airborne particles from the release of milk and faeces respectively
- maintaining the integrity of the animal organs such as the bladder, intestines and uterus when they are removed and lowered to the eviscerating table, and
- washing stock on the race entering the kill floor with low pressure hoses to reduce the release of potentially contaminated airborne particles.

Further Information

Related WorkSafe publications

Beef cattle handling - A practical safety guide.

Dairy safety - A practical safety guide.

Related Industry publications

A Guide to Q fever and Q fever Vaccination. Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union. meatiesohs.org

The MLA OH&S Reference guide, Australian Red Meat Industry. Meat & Livestock Australia

redmeatinovation.com.au/ohs

The Australian Immunisation Handbook 9th Ed, Section 3.17 Q fever. Department of Health and Ageing, Office of Health Protection. health.gov.au

Contact Details

Call us on: 1800 136 089

Email us at: info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

For more information on occupational health and safety,
go to WorkSafe's website: [worksafe.vic.gov.au](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au)

***Note:** This guidance material has been prepared using the best information available to the Victorian WorkCover Authority and should be used for general use only. Any information about legislative obligations or responsibilities included in this material is only applicable to the circumstances described in the material. You should always check the legislation referred to in this material and make your own judgement about what action you may need to take to ensure you have complied with the law. Accordingly, the Victorian WorkCover Authority cannot be held responsible and extends no warranties as to the suitability of the information for your specific circumstances; or actions taken by third parties as a result of information contained in the guidance material*