Yersinia infection (yersiniosis) is a bacterial infection of the bowel (intestine) usually caused by *Yersinia enterocolitica*. It occurs worldwide, but is fairly uncommon.

How *Yersinia* infection is spread

Many domesticated and wild animals carry *Yersinia* in their intestines. Spread to people occurs by eating food or water contaminated by infected human or animal faeces. Contact with infected pets and domestic stock may also cause infection.

*Yersinia* is able to multiply at temperatures in normal refrigerators, so sometimes if meat is kept without freezing large numbers of the bacteria may be present.

*Yersinia* is also occasionally transmitted by blood transfusion as it is able to multiply in stored blood products. This is why people are asked not to donate blood if they have had diarrhoea recently.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms vary with age and are commonest in young children. They include:

- fever
- diarrhoea, often bloody in young children
- abdominal pain and cramps
- symptoms similar to appendicitis in older children and adults
- joint pain occurs in half of affected adults.

Diagnosis

The diagnosis is usually made by a faecal specimen or by detecting *Yersinia* using a PCR (polymerase chain reaction) test in a pathology laboratory.

Incubation period

(time between becoming infected and developing symptoms)

Symptoms typically develop 4 to 7 days after exposure.

Infectious period

(time during which an infected person can infect others)

Usually 2 to 3 weeks. If not treated with antibiotics, the organism may be shed in the faeces for 2 to 3 months.

Treatment

Effective antibiotic treatment is available.

Prevention

- Exclude people with *Yersinia* infection from childcare, preschool, school and work until there has been no diarrhoea for 24 hours. If working as a food handler in a food business, the exclusion period should be until there has been no diarrhoea or vomiting for 48 hours.
- Infants, children and adults with *Yersinia* infection should not swim until there has been no diarrhoea for 24 hours.
- Cook all meat thoroughly.
- Good food handling procedures should be followed.
- Follow good hand washing procedures. Good cleaning procedures should be used, including for objects such as toys that may be shared.
Yersinia infection

- Wash hands after contact with farm animals, pets, animal faeces or animal environments.
- Do not drink unpasteurised milk.
- Anyone with diarrhoea should avoid swimming in pools.
- Babies and small children without diarrhoea who are not toilet trained should wear tight fitting waterproof pants or swimming nappies in swimming pools and changed regularly in the change room. When faecal accidents occur, swimming pools should be properly disinfected.

Useful links

- Preventing food poisoning at home
- Pasteurised milk v’s raw milk

SA Health website – www.sahealth.sa.gov.au
- Collecting a faecal sample
- Exclusion periods from childcare, preschool, school and work
- Hand hygiene
- Keeping areas clean
- When you have a notifiable condition

1 – In South Australia the law requires doctors and laboratories to report some infections or diseases to SA Health. These infections or diseases are commonly referred to as ‘notifiable conditions’.