

Rowing and Water-borne Disease

Guidance from the British Rowing Medical Panel on rowing and water-borne disease.

Leptospirosis/Weil's Disease

Weil's Disease, also known as Leptospirosis, is rare in Britain with around 40 – 50 cases reported each year, however one or two people do die from the disease every year. The disease is carried by water organisms, so those taking part in water sports can be at risk.

While the risk of contracting the disease from recreational water is very small, British Rowing is taking a precautionary approach and reiterating its advice that the serious nature of the disease means that rowers must be aware of the dangers and should take simple, routine precautions to reduce the risk of infection.

The most likely place for Leptospirosis to be found is in stagnant water, water that is adjacent to farm land and any water where rodents are common.

What are the symptoms?

In the early stages Leptospirosis can be mistaken for flu but can develop into jaundice, kidney and liver failure.

Typically early symptoms develop between 7 – 14 days after infection, although in rare cases the incubation can be as short as 2 – 3 days or as long as 30 days. Some cases may be asymptomatic, some may present with a flu-like illness with severe headache, chills, muscle aches and vomiting.

Many of the symptoms of Leptospirosis are the same as for other diseases and diagnosis is based on clinical suspicion followed by a blood test. There is a specialist reference laboratory for the disease that doctors can consult.

Ways to avoid contracting Weil's Disease

- Wash or shower after rowing.
- Cover minor cuts and scratches with waterproof plasters before getting in your boat.
- Clean open wounds, such as blisters or calf abrasions with an anti-bacterial substance.
- Wear trainers or boots to avoid cutting your feet before getting in your boat.

What to do if you think you have symptoms?

- Early diagnosis and treatment is important.
- If you develop flu-like symptoms after rowing go to your GP and say that you are a rower.
- Leptospirosis is treated with antibiotics which should be administered early in the course of the disease.