

Occupational disease

20.01.01

Melioidosis in the workplace >

This information bulletin provides information relating to the bacterium *Burkholderia pseudomallei* which causes an infectious disease called melioidosis. It is not intended to be used as medical advice.

Introduction

Melioidosis is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Burkholderia pseudomallei*. Melioidosis is predominately a disease of tropical climates. The bacteria causing melioidosis are found in contaminated water and soil and are spread to humans and animals through direct contact with the contaminated source. During heavy rainfall the bacteria may be found in surface water and mud and may become airborne.

Who is at risk?

The bacterium that causes melioidosis is common in the environment in tropical and sub-tropical parts of the Northern Territory.

In these areas, the disease is most likely to develop in people exposed to contaminated soil or water either due to occupational or recreational exposure.

The disease is more likely to develop in people who have underlying conditions such as:

- Diabetes
- Heavy alcohol consumption
- Kidney disease
- Lung disease
- Cancer; and
- Those on immunosuppressive therapy.

Healthy people can also get the disease if they work in muddy soil without good hand, foot and breathing protection. Direct person-to-person contracting of the disease is extremely rare.

Safe work practices

There is no vaccine for melioidosis, therefore safe work practices must be implemented for people who work in an environment where they may be exposed to the bacteria.

Safe work procedures should be developed within the framework of risk identification, risk assessment and risk control. Work practices and the choice of personal protective equipment should be based on developed risk management strategies.

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The following should be taken into account prior to commencing work where exposure may occur:

- Check with local health authorities if there are known soil borne diseases in the proposed work area.
- Identify any team member in higher risk categories (eg members with diabetes, lung or kidney disease or any open cuts or sores) and deploy them on an alternative task.
- Avoid skin contact with wet soil or muddy water by restructuring the task or by using impermeable personnel protective equipment (PPE) (eg glasses, respirators, gloves, appropriate footwear).
- At the beginning of each job, staff should wash their hands to both clean them and identify any cuts or breaks in the skin. Cuts or abrasions (including minor cuts and scratches) should be covered with waterproof dressings.
- Avoid activities that produce dust.
- Provide adequate washing facilities and ensure team members wash thoroughly before eating or drinking.

Personal protective clothing and equipment serves as a barrier to exposure to bacteria. Staff should be trained in correct fit and use and the appropriate equipment should be accessible to staff at all times. All this equipment should be checked regularly, maintained and restocked as necessary.

More information

A range of information is available on the internet relating to melioidosis. The following web address may assist in providing further information relating to this disease:

http://www.health.nt.gov.au/Centre_for_Disease_Control/index.aspx

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