Brucellosis is an infection caused by the *Brucella* bacteria that is spread to humans from infected animals. New Zealand is Brucella-free, but animals overseas are can be infected.

There are five types of *Brucella* bacteria that that can cause brucellosis in humans. *Brucella melitensis* commonly infects goats, sheep and camels overseas, particularly in the Mediterranean, Middle East, Central Asia and Central America. *Brucella ovis* is found in some sheep in New Zealand but is not known to cause disease in humans.

A case of brucellosis was notified in New Zealand in 2015 for a man who had recently arrived from Saudi Arabia. 15 cases of brucellosis have been notified here since 1997. No locally acquired cases of brucellosis have occurred since 1996.

**What are the symptoms?**

The infection usually starts with a flu-like illness, that may include: fever, headache, weakness, drenching sweat, chills, weight loss, joint and muscle pain, and general aches.

Inflammation of the liver and spleen, and gastrointestinal or respiratory symptoms may also occur. The testicles may become inflamed for men. The valves inside the heart may become infected and this rare complication can be fatal.

Symptoms usually start 5 to 60 days after becoming infected. The infection typically lasts for days or months but can occasionally last for a year or more and may recur. Some people’s symptoms may be mild and some experience no symptoms.

Pregnant women and their babies are at risk as the infection may cause birth defects, spontaneous abortion or fetal death if left untreated.

**How is it spread?**

People can become infected after contact with an infected animal including blood, urine, other discharges, birth products and aborted foetuses. The risk is greatest if a person has skin cuts or grazes that come into contact with tissue or body fluids from an infected animal.

People travelling to affected countries may become infected after eating unpasteurised dairy products, such as raw milk and some cheeses (from sheep, goats, cows or camels) or undercooked meat from an infected animal. They may also be exposed when caring for, handling or hunting infected animals.

The infection is very rarely passed from person-to-person.

**How is it prevented?**

Travellers should take the following precautions if visiting countries where brucellosis is common:

- Avoid eating or drinking unpasteurised dairy products like milk or cheese. Raw milk can be boiled before consumption if pasteurisation is not available.
- Avoid eating or drinking undercooked meat.
- Avoid direct bare skin contact with animal tissues, blood and other body fluids.

**How is it diagnosed?**

The illness is diagnosed by testing a specimen for a specific nucleic acid or blood for the presence of antibodies to the bacteria. Tests may take at least 10 days to confirm the presence of the *Brucella* bacteria.

**How is it treated?**

Effective treatment usually involves a combination of antibiotics for at least six weeks. Occasionally, antibiotics may need to continue for months. Despite treatment brucellosis can sometimes recur.