

A squirrel from the northern outskirts of Corvallis recently died of a serious bacterial disease that can also infect people. Veterinary diagnosticians at Oregon State University's Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory identified tularemia as the cause of death of this animal. The animal was brought to the laboratory by Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife officials after responding to reports of squirrels in the area acting sluggish or being found dead.

Tularemia is typically found in small mammals such as squirrels, voles, beavers, and rabbits, but human infection can occur. Hunters or others who spend time in the outdoors are at a greater risk of exposure to the organism causing this disease. People can develop tularemia by handling infected animals, particularly if blood or tissue from the infected animal contacts the skin or mucous membranes, or by consumption of undercooked meat from an infected animal. Ticks, fleas, and biting flies can also participate in the transmission of the bacteria. Infection can result in skin lesions, swollen glands, sore throat, fever, abdominal pain, vomiting, and diarrhea. Your doctor can prescribe antibiotics to treat the condition. Wearing rubber gloves while handling potential carrier animals, and thoroughly cooking meat are measures that will minimize the risk of infection.

The Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory has also diagnosed tularemia in small mammals from southern Oregon this summer. The laboratory works closely with Oregon public health and wildlife officials in monitoring animal diseases with potential to infect people. For further information on this disease please phone Dr. Rob Bildfell, a veterinary pathologist at the OSU VDL (541-737-6965), or contact the Oregon Department of Health Services (503-731-4024). Individuals that suspect similar disease problems in their local wildlife population are urged to contact their nearest ODF&W office, or Dr. Colin Gillin, State Wildlife Veterinarian (541-757-4186, Ext. 232).