

# SURVEILLANCE OF INFECTIOUS DISEASES IN ANIMALS AND HUMANS IN SWEDEN 2020

Chapter excerpt -  
Q fever



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**Cover:** Juvenile mink in hand. Photo: Elina Kähkönen

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**Reporting guidelines:** Reporting guidelines were introduced in 2018 for those chapters related to purely animal pathogens. The guidelines build on experiences from several EU projects, and have been validated by a team of international experts in animal health surveillance. The aim is to develop these guidelines further in collaboration within the global surveillance community and they have therefore been made available in the form of a wiki on the collaborative platform GitHub (<https://github.com/SVA-SE/AHSURED/wiki>). Feel free to contribute!

**Layout:** The production of this report continues to be accomplished using a primarily open-source toolset. The method allows the source text, produced by authors, to be edited independently of the template for the layout which can be modified and reused for future reports. Specifically, the chapter texts, tables and captions are authored in Microsoft Word and then converted using pandoc and R to the LaTeX typesetting language. Most figures and maps are produced using the R software for statistical computing and the LaTeX library pgfplots. Development for 2020 has further improved the importing of content from Excel files to automatically build figures in the pgfplots LaTeX library. The tool is available as an R-package on GitHub (<https://github.com/SVA-SE/mill/>). The report generation R-package and process was designed by Thomas Rosendal, Wiktor Gustafsson and Stefan Widgren. In 2020, final typesetting was done primarily by Wiktor Gustafsson with contributions from the report authors.

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# Q fever

## BACKGROUND

Q fever is a zoonotic disease caused by the bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*. Because of its tolerance to heat, dryness and many disinfectants, the organism is difficult to eradicate. Cattle, sheep and goats are considered to be the main reservoirs of the organism, but pets such as dogs and cats may also become infected. The agent is shed through several routes, such as milk, foetal and vaginal fluids, faeces, urine and semen. *C. burnetii* has also been isolated from ticks.

Transmission to humans is mainly considered to be through inhalation of contaminated aerosols and dust. Therefore, contact with dusty animal products and environments, such as wool, hay and bedding material may pose a risk. Also, consumption of unpasteurised milk may be a risk to susceptible individuals. In humans, immunosuppression, predisposing valvular heart disease and pregnancy may increase susceptibility to Q fever.

Larger outbreaks of Q fever, when reported, are principally associated with small ruminants, whereas cattle can be a source of sporadic cases. In many countries, Q fever is seen as an occupational hazard for professionals in contact with domestic ruminants and their environments, such as farmers, veterinarians and abattoir workers.

The presence of *C. burnetii* in domestic animal populations in Sweden has been known since the early 1990s. In Sweden the bacterium was first isolated from a sheep placenta in a herd on the isle of Gotland. In 2008/2009, a national survey of dairy cattle herds showed that 8% of the herds were antibody positive in bulk milk. There were large regional differences with the highest prevalence on the isles of Gotland and Öland (59% and 35%, respectively). In 2010, national surveys of sheep and dairy goat herds showed a very low prevalence of antibodies: 0.6% (three out of 518 investigated herds) and 1.7% (one out of 58 investigated herds), respectively. In addition, goat bulk-milk was analysed for the agent; *C. burnetii* was not detected. In 2011, 80 sheep farms were investigated by analysing vaginal swab samples from sheep taken in conjunction with lambing without detecting the agent in any of the samples. These results suggest that *C. burnetii* is a rare pathogen in the Swedish sheep and goat populations. In a survey of 99 Swedish moose during 2008–2010 no antibody positive samples were found, indicating that exposure to *C. burnetii* is rare also in this wild species.

In humans, only two domestic cases were reported in the 1980s and 1990s. During the same period, a serological survey in humans identified 28% of sheep farmers and 13% of veterinarians to be antibody positive, indicating a larger extent of the exposure. However, a prospective study on cases of endocarditis showed that only one of 329 patients had antibodies to *C. burnetii* indicating that chronic Q fever endocarditis is rare.



Surveillance for Q fever in animals is passive in Sweden. Cattle, sheep and goats are considered to be the main reservoirs of the causing bacterium *Coxiella burnetii*. Photo: Ylva Persson.

Since Q fever became notifiable in humans in 2004, one to three cases have been reported annually until 2008, when an increase was observed. Only one case was classified as domestic during the period from 2004–2009. In 2010, the situation changed as eight of the totally 11 reported cases claimed to have been infected in Sweden. All these domestic cases were identified as a result of contact tracing when investigating a farm in southern Sweden, which was included in a national survey on dairy herds and where the bulk milk from the cows was shown to be antibody positive for *C. burnetii*. During the period when Q fever has been a notifiable disease, only about 20% of the reported cases have been women (Figure 16). A similar difference in gender distribution has been described from other countries, but the cause is not clear.

Since the 1980s, few domestically acquired cases of Q fever have been reported apart from the cluster in 2010. Most reported cases have been infected in Mediterranean countries, including the Canary Islands.

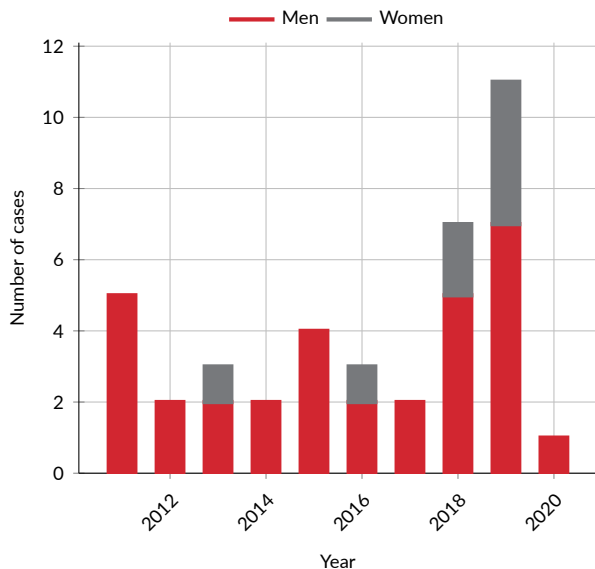


Figure 16: Number of human cases of Q fever by sex during the time period from 2011 to 2020.

## DISEASE

### Animals

Q fever in animals is usually asymptomatic but can also lead to reproductive failures such as abortions or still/weak born calves. In herds where the agent has been proven to be present, the investigation of reproductive problems should still exclude other causes before reproductive failures are attributed to *C. burnetii* infection.

### Humans

In humans the infection can vary from asymptomatic or flu-like illness to acute pneumonia. Liver complications and obstetric complications can also occur. Most patients recover but some may develop a chronic illness. The incubation period varies likely depending on the number of organisms inhaled but is usually 2–3 weeks.

## LEGISLATION

### Animals

Q fever is a notifiable disease (SJVFS 2013:23). Notification of a primary case of Q fever in animals is based on detection of the agent *C. burnetii* or increased antibody levels in paired samples.

### Humans

Q fever has been notifiable according to the Communicable Disease Act since 2004 (SFS 2004:168) with the amendments of SFS 2013:634.

## SURVEILLANCE

### Animals

Surveillance for Q fever in animals is passive.

### Humans

Notification of human cases is mandatory and surveillance is based on identification of the disease by a treating physician or by laboratory diagnosis. Both are obligated to report identified cases to the regional and national level to enable further analyses and adequate intervention measures. For laboratory verification of the infection, serology and PCR are used.

## RESULTS

### Animals

Limited testing was done in 2020 on cattle mainly for import and export reasons. Blood samples from 11 cattle were analysed for the presence of antibodies by ELISA. As serological tests no longer are performed in Sweden the samples were sent to Denmark for analyses. Animals from one herd were tested for *C. burnetii* in bulk milk by PCR. In addition, one calf foetus was tested for the agent by PCR in conjunction with the surveillance in aborted foetuses. All samples that were submitted for testing were negative.

### Humans

In 2020, one case of Q fever was reported, which is considerably less than the annual average over the last ten-year period 16. The case had been infected in Spain through animal contact. The very low number of imported Q-fever cases in 2020 can probably, to some extent, be explained by changed travel patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## DISCUSSION

Due to the nature of the infection with asymptomatic cases and unspecific clinical signs it is likely that Q fever is underreported in both humans and animals in Sweden. Only a few human cases are diagnosed every year, of which the majority are infected abroad. The surveillance in animals has been passive since 2012 and as a consequence of this, very few animals are being tested every year, mainly for export reasons. Based on the passive surveillance we know very little about the current prevalence of Q fever in the animal population.

## REFERENCES

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