Q Fever and Valvular Heart Disease

Q fever is a zoonotic disease caused by Coxiella burnetii, a species of bacteria that is distributed globally. Cattle, sheep, and goats are the primary reservoirs of C. burnetii. Only about one-half of all people infected with C. burnetii show signs of clinical illness, which are similar to flu and may include fever, sweats, headache, back pain and physical weakness. In general, most patients will recover to good health within several months without any treatment. Chronic Q fever, characterized by infection that persists for more than 6 months is uncommon but is a much more serious disease. A serious complication of chronic Q fever is endocarditis, generally involving the aortic heart valves, less commonly the mitral valve.

Patients that have pre-existing valvular heart disease or have a history of vascular graft are at higher risk for developing chronic Q fever. Employees with valvular or congenital heart defects or those who are receiving immunosuppressant drugs should not work with infected animals at the time of animal birthing or have contact with any fetal or uterine fluids.

If you have a history of valvular heart disease, it is recommended that you discuss your condition and your work environment (animal exposure; frequency and duration, personal protective controls and other safety practices) with the staff at the University’s Occupational Health Services (OHS) clinic. This allows for planning of special precautions and work assignments according to risk factors.

To receive authorization for an OHS clinic visit, email the OSEH Medical Surveillance Coordinator