

# FACT SHEET: Legionellosis

November 2023

## WHAT IS LEGIONELLOSIS?

People who get sick after being exposed to *Legionella* bacteria can develop two different illnesses, collectively known as legionellosis: Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever. Legionnaires' disease is a serious type of pneumonia (lung infection), and Pontiac fever is a less serious illness.

## WHO GETS LEGIONELLOSIS?

Most healthy people exposed to *Legionella* bacteria do not get sick. People at an increased risk of getting sick are:

- People 50 years or older
- Current or former people who smoke
- People with a chronic lung disease (like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or emphysema)
- People with weak immune systems or who take drugs that weaken the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy)
- People with cancer
- People with underlying illnesses such as diabetes, kidney failure, or liver failure

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF LEGIONELLOSIS?

Legionnaires' disease symptoms include cough, shortness of breath, fever, muscle aches and headaches. Legionnaires' disease can also cause symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, and confusion. The primary symptoms of Pontiac fever are fever and muscle aches.

## HOW IS LEGIONELLOSIS SPREAD?

*Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in freshwater environments, like lakes and streams. The bacteria can become a health concern when it grows and spreads in human-made building water systems like showerheads, sink faucets, cooling towers, hot tubs, and decorative fountains. *Legionella* bacteria are a particular risk in large, complex plumbing systems. People are exposed to *Legionella* by breathing in small droplets of water that contain the bacteria. Less commonly, people can get sick by the aspiration of

drinking water containing *Legionella* bacteria. This happens when water accidentally goes into the lungs while drinking.

## HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

Symptoms of Legionnaires' disease usually begin 2 to 14 days after being exposed to the bacteria, but it can take longer. Symptoms of Pontiac fever begin between a few hours to 3 days after being exposed to the bacteria and usually last less than a week.

## IS A PERSON WITH LEGIONELLOSIS CONTAGIOUS?

In general, people do not spread Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever to other people. However, this may be possible in rare circumstances.

## HOW IS LEGIONELLOSIS TREATED?

Legionnaires' disease requires treatment with antibiotics. Healthy people usually recover after being sick with Legionnaires' disease, but they often need hospitalization. Possible complications of Legionnaires' disease include lung disease and death. Pontiac fever goes away without requiring treatment.

## CAN LEGIONELLOSIS BE PREVENTED?

There are no vaccines that can prevent legionellosis. Instead, the key to preventing legionellosis is to reduce the risk of *Legionella* growth and spread. Building owners and managers can use a [water management program](#) to reduce the risk of *Legionella* growing and spreading. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention developed a [toolkit](#) to help building owners and managers develop and implement a water management program.

## WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about legionellosis and other related health topics can be found at [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov). For additional information, please visit [dchealth.dc.gov](https://dchealth.dc.gov) or call (844)-493-2652.