

LEGIONELLOSIS FACT SHEET

What is legionellosis?

Legionellosis is a respiratory disease caused by a type of bacterium called *Legionella*. The bacteria can cause a serious type of pneumonia called Legionnaires' disease or a less serious infection called Pontiac fever that has symptoms similar to a mild flu. *Legionella* is found naturally in freshwater, such as lakes and streams, and grows best in warm water. *Legionella* can cause disease when it grows and spreads in human-made water systems such as the following:

- Showers and faucets
- Cooling towers (air conditioning units for large buildings)
- Hot tubs that aren't drained after each use
- Decorative fountains and water features
- Hot water tanks and heaters
- Large plumbing systems

Who can get legionellosis?

Most healthy people exposed to *Legionella* do not get sick. However, some people are at increased risk for becoming sick:

- People 50 years or older
- Current or former smokers
- People with a chronic lung disease (like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or emphysema)
- People with weak immune systems from diseases like cancer, diabetes or kidney failure
- People who take drugs that weaken the immune system

How does legionellosis spread?

Legionella can grow in human-made water systems, such as hot tubs, hot water tanks and heaters, and decorative fountains, if water is not moving or does not have enough disinfectant to kill germs. These water sources become a health problem when small droplets of water that contain the bacteria get into the air and people breathe them in. Less commonly, people can get Legionnaires' disease by aspiration of drinking water. This happens when water "goes down the wrong pipe," into the trachea (windpipe)

and lungs instead of the digestive tract. In general, Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever do not spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms of legionellosis?

Legionnaires' disease is very similar to other types of pneumonia, with symptoms that include cough, shortness of breath, fever, muscle aches and headaches. It can also cause symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea and confusion. Pontiac fever symptoms are primarily fever and muscle aches.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of Legionnaires' disease usually begin two to 10 days after being exposed to the bacteria, but it can take longer, so people should watch for symptoms for about two weeks after exposure. Symptoms of Pontiac fever begin between a few hours to three days after being exposed to the bacteria and usually last less than a week.

How is legionellosis treated?

Legionnaires' disease requires treatment with antibiotics. Most cases of this illness can be treated successfully. Healthy people usually get better after being sick with Legionnaires' disease, but they often need care in the hospital. Possible complications of Legionnaires' disease include lung failure and death. Pontiac fever goes away without specific treatment.

How can legionellosis be prevented?

To protect against legionellosis, water systems in buildings should be maintained in order to reduce the risk of growing and spreading.

Where can I get more information?

Information about legionellosis and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9065.

