



Legionnaires' Disease

(PUBLIC HANDOUT)

What is Legionnaires' Disease?

Legionnaires' disease is caused by a type of bacteria called *Legionella*. The bacteria got its name in 1976, when many people who went to a Philadelphia convention of the American Legion suffered from an outbreak of this disease, a type of pneumonia (lung infection). Although this type of bacteria was around before 1976, more illness from Legionnaires' disease is being detected now. This is because we are now looking for this disease whenever a patient has pneumonia.

Where does Legionnaires' Disease come from?

The *Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in the environment such as in water.

The bacteria grow best in warm water like the kind found in:

- Hot tubs
- Cooling towers
- Hot water tanks
- Large plumbing systems
- Parts of the air-conditioning systems of large buildings

They do not seem to grow in car or window air-conditioners.

Who Gets Legionnaires' Disease and how?

People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) that has been infected with the bacteria. An example of this may be from breathing in the steam from a whirlpool spa that has not been properly cleaned and disinfected.

The bacteria are NOT spread from one person to another person. Outbreaks are when two or more people become ill in the same place at about the same time, such as patients in hospitals.

People most at risk of getting sick from the bacteria are older people (usually 65 years of age or older), as well as people who are smokers, or those who have a chronic lung disease (like emphysema).

People who have weak immune systems from diseases like cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure are also more likely to get sick from *Legionella* bacteria. People who take drugs to weaken the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy) are also at higher risk.



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How is Legionnaires' Disease diagnosed?

Chest X-rays are needed to find the pneumonia caused by the bacteria, and other tests can be done on sputum (phlegm), as well as blood or urine to find evidence of the bacteria in the body. Several laboratory tests can be used to detect the *Legionella* bacteria within the body. The laboratory test used most often for diagnosis is the urinary antigen test, which detects *Legionella* bacteria from a urine specimen, or sample.

What are the symptoms?

Legionnaires' disease can have symptoms like many other forms of pneumonia and can be hard to diagnose at first.

Signs of the disease can include:

- a high fever
- chills
- a cough

Some people may also suffer from muscle aches and headaches. These symptoms usually begin 2 to 14 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

How serious is Legionnaires' Disease?

Legionnaires' disease can be very serious and can cause death in up to 5% to 30% of cases.

How is Legionnaires' Disease treated?

Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics [drugs that kill bacteria in the body], and healthy people usually recover from infection.

How is Legionnaires' Disease prevented?

Disinfection of the water supply should not be done automatically when *Legionella* in environmental cultures is discovered. It may be cost-effective to focus on early diagnosis and water treatment in facilities affected with *Legionella*. If clinical and laboratory tests for legionellosis show more than one case and high levels found in the water system, one would have the option of installing a disinfection system to destroy the organism.

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What should I do if I was exposed to Legionnaires' Disease?

Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become sick. If you have reason to believe you were exposed to the bacteria, talk to your doctor or local health department. Be sure to mention if you have traveled in the last two weeks.

A person diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease in the workplace is not a threat to others who share office space or other areas with him or her. However, if you believe that there your workplace was the source of the person's illness, contact your local health department.

Where do I get more information on Legionnaires' Disease?

- Your healthcare provider
- Your local department of health – Cumberland/Salem County Departments of Health www.cshealth.org
- The Center for Disease Control and Prevent http://www.cdc.gov/legionella/patient_facts.htm