

Legionella

What is *Legionella*?

Legionella is a bacterium that causes an illness called Legionnaires' disease. Legionnaires' disease can be very serious if not treated promptly with antibiotics. Legionnaires' disease is not usually a serious illness for healthy people, but can be very dangerous in the elderly or people who have weak immune systems from diseases like cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure (immuno-compromised people).

How do I get Legionnaires' disease?

You must inhale or swallow the *Legionella* bacteria to become infected. *Legionella* is usually spread through the following:

- *Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. You must breathe in the mist of vapor (small droplets of water in air) that has been contaminated with the bacteria. *Legionella* grow best in warm water, like hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems, or parts of the air-conditioning systems of large buildings.
- *Legionella* is **NOT** spread from one person to another by coughing or sneezing, sharing drinks, hugging or kissing.

Symptoms

Symptoms can begin 2-10 days (usually 5-6 days) after ingesting the bacteria.

Legionnaires' disease can have symptoms similar to pneumonia.

Symptoms include:

- High fever
- Muscle aches and chills
- Cough

Prevention

- Cooling towers should be drained when not in use.
- Tap water should not be used in respiratory therapy devices.
- Hot water systems should be maintained at 122°F (50°C) or higher.
- Appropriate bacteria killing chemicals should be used in warm water systems.

Treatment for Legionnaires' disease

If you think you have Legionnaires' disease, see your health care provider – especially if you are immuno-compromised or elderly. Antibiotic treatment is available.



Hand washing steps:

1. Use soap and warm running water.
2. Scrub hands for at least 20 seconds; use a nail brush.
3. Wash all surfaces:
 - Between fingers
 - Under fingernails
 - Back of hands
 - Wrists
4. Rinse well and dry hands with a clean paper towel.

Pontiac Fever

Pontiac fever is a milder infection caused by the same type of *Legionella* bacteria. This illness has the same initial symptoms as Legionnaires' disease, but is not associated with pneumonia or death. Symptoms include fever, headaches, and muscle aches. Most people recover in 2-5 days without treatment.



Tri-County Health
Department

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