

Legionnaires' disease

Legionnaires' disease is caused by Legionella bacteria, which are widespread in our environment. They are found in natural water bodies such as rivers, lakes, creeks and hot springs. The bacteria are also found in spas, potting mix, warm water systems and artificial systems that use water for cooling, heating or industrial processes, such as cooling towers.

A person may catch Legionnaires' disease by breathing in fine droplets of water that contain the bacteria. You cannot catch it from another person or by drinking contaminated water.

Some people are at greater risk of infection than others

Although this is a common kind of bacteria in the environment, only a few people who come in contact with the bacteria become infected. Some people are at greater risk, such as:

- People over 50 years of age
- Smokers
- People with chronic illness
- People with medical conditions that impair their immune system.

Symptoms of Legionnaires' disease

The symptoms of Legionnaires' disease usually begin to appear within six days of being exposed to the bacteria. Early symptoms are like the flu and include:

- Headache (often severe)
- Fever
- Chills
- Muscle aches and pains
- A dry cough and shortness of breath.

Sometimes other systems in the body are affected. This can cause:

- Diarrhoea
- Mental confusion
- Kidney failure.

If you have these symptoms, see your doctor.

Diagnosis and treatment for Legionnaires' disease

There are many other causes of Legionnaires' symptoms and Legionella is not very common. Special tests are needed to diagnose the disease. A urine or sputum (mucus that is coughed up) test or blood samples taken three to six weeks apart will usually diagnose Legionnaires' disease. The tests for Legionnaires' disease are not screening tests – there is no value in being tested if you are not unwell.

The infection can be treated with appropriate antibiotics.

Preventing Legionnaires' disease

There is no vaccine to prevent the disease. However, the growth of the bacteria in spas and cooling towers can be controlled. You can also take care to avoid exposure to Legionella bacteria from other sources, such as potting mix (see below).

Maintenance and treatment of artificial systems

A number of different regulations set out how to maintain and treat cooling towers, warm water systems and public spas to prevent the Legionella bacteria growing. For further information, visit the website here.

Take care with potting mix

In recent years, some cases of Legionnaires' disease have been linked to the use of potting mix. When using potting mix:

- Always wear gloves to avoid transferring the potting mix from your hand to your mouth.
- Wear a face mask.
- Open the bag carefully to avoid breathing in the dust.
- Wet the contents of the bag to prevent dust.
- Wash your hands after using potting mix.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local hospital
- Your local council
- Your nearest Department of Health office
- Department of Health, Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit, Tel. 1300 651 160

Things to remember

- Legionnaires' disease is a rare form of pneumonia.
- Not everyone who comes into contact with the bacteria is affected.
- If you have the symptoms, contact your doctor immediately.
- Early treatment can prevent the disease from becoming severe.
- Always take care when using potting mix.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Department of Health - Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit

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