



Legionnaires' Disease – Frequently Asked Questions

What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease (LEE-juh-nares) is caused by a type of bacteria called Legionella. Each year, between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease in the U.S. However, many infections are not diagnosed or reported, so this number may be higher. More illness is usually found in the summer and early fall, but it can happen any time of year.

What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

Legionella can cause pneumonia, a lung infection, or a more mild illness called Pontiac Fever. Symptoms of pneumonia include high fever, chills and cough, and these symptoms usually start 2-12 days after exposure to the bacteria. Pontiac Fever causes fever, headaches and muscle aches that last for 2 to 5 days.

Who gets this disease?

People most at risk of getting sick from the bacteria are older people (usually 65 years of age or older), smokers, and those who have a chronic lung disease (like emphysema). People who have weak immune systems from diseases like cancer, diabetes, organ transplant or kidney failure are also more likely to get sick from Legionella bacteria.

How serious is it? What is the treatment?

Legionnaires' disease can be very serious and can cause death in people who are older or have medical conditions. Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics and healthy people usually recover from infection.

Where do Legionella bacteria come from?

The Legionella bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. The bacteria grow best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems, or parts of the air-conditioning systems of large buildings. They do not seem to grow in car or window air-conditioners.

How do people get Legionnaires' disease?

People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) that has been contaminated with the bacteria. The bacteria are NOT spread from one person to another person. Outbreaks have been linked to aerosol sources in the community, or in cruise ships and hotels, with the most likely sources being whirlpool spas, swimming pools, cooling towers (air-conditioning units from large buildings), fountains and water used for drinking and bathing.

How is Legionnaires' disease diagnosed?

Several laboratory tests can be used to detect the Legionella bacteria within the body. The most commonly used laboratory test for diagnosis is the urinary antigen test, which detects part of the Legionella bacteria in a urine specimen. Additionally, if the Legionella bacteria can be cultured (grown on a special media) from a lung biopsy specimen, sputum, or various other sites.

What should I do if I think I was exposed to Legionella bacteria?

Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill. If you have reason to believe you were exposed to the bacteria, talk to your doctor or contact the OC Health Care Agency at (714) 834-8180.

For more information, please visit www.ochealthinfo.com/Legionella.