

# Legionellosis



## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is legionellosis?

Legionellosis (lee-juh-nel-OH-sis) is an illness caused by infection with the bacterium *Legionella pneumophila*. It can cause two types of illness:

- Legionnaires' disease, the more severe form which includes pneumonia
- Pontiac fever, the milder form without pneumonia

### Where are *Legionella* bacteria found?

*Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in the environment. They can be found in creeks, ponds, hot and cold water systems (especially hot water tanks), air conditioning cooling towers, and soil.

### How common is legionellosis?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that about 8,000 to 18,000 Americans develop legionellosis each year. An additional unknown number of people are infected with *Legionella* bacteria and have only mild symptoms or no illness at all. More illness is usually found in the summer and early fall, but it can happen anytime of the year. In New Jersey, about 100 cases of legionellosis are reported each year.

### Who gets legionellosis?

People at most risk of getting sick from the bacteria are:

- Older people (usually 55 years of age or older)
- People who smoke cigarettes
- People who drink alcohol heavily
- People who have chronic lung disease
- People with weak immune systems

It rarely occurs in otherwise healthy people.

### What are the symptoms of legionellosis?

The usual symptoms of legionellosis may include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Cough

Some people may also have:

- Muscle pain
- Headache
- Diarrhea

Symptoms can start anywhere from two to 14 days after being exposed to the bacteria. Most often, symptoms begin five to six days after being exposed.

## **How do people get legionellosis?**

People get infected with *Legionella* when they breathe in steam, mist or vapor from a water source that is contaminated with the *Legionella* bacteria. Some potential water sources include whirlpools, spas, air conditioning cooling towers, and showers.

Person-to-person spread has never been documented. It is not necessary to avoid people who are ill with legionellosis.

Most cases of legionellosis occur as single isolated events. Outbreaks are relatively rare.

## **How is legionellosis diagnosed?**

If a health care provider suspects legionellosis, samples of the patient's blood, urine, and sputum (mucus coughed up from the lungs) may be examined. A chest x-ray may also be taken to look for signs of pneumonia.

## **What is the treatment for legionellosis?**

Legionellosis can be successfully treated with antibiotics. (NOTE – it is very important to finish your antibiotics, even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

## **What can be done to prevent legionellosis?**

Isolated cases of legionellosis are often not preventable. However, they are all investigated to confirm the diagnosis, rule out an outbreak, and try to identify a source of contamination if possible.

## **Where can I get more information?**

- NJ Department of Health and Senior Services <http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
[http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/legionellosis\\_g.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/legionellosis_g.htm)
- Your health care provider
- Your local health department

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.  
Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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