

	Division of Environmental Health and Communicable Disease Prevention	
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Legionellosis

(Legionnaires Disease, Pontiac Fever)

FACT SHEET

What is Legionellosis?

Legionellosis is an infectious disease caused by bacteria called *Legionella*. The disease may take two forms; the more serious form may develop into pneumonia. Cases of disease may occur throughout the year, but most cases occur in the summer and fall. Normally this disease occurs as single cases, however, outbreaks have occurred in Missouri.

Who gets Legionellosis?

Anyone can get Legionellosis, but the disease is most common among middle-aged or older men. Individuals who have weakened immune systems due to chronic diseases, such as diabetes, kidney failure or HIV infection are at higher risk of the disease. In addition, those who have an immune system that has been altered by medications, such as steroids or chemotherapy may get the disease more often. Smokers and heavy drinkers are also more prone to get the disease.

How is the disease spread?

The bacteria are sometimes contained inside fine mists created by such things as water-cooling towers, hot tubs, and decorative fountains. It is possible for people to inhale the mist. Person to person spread does not occur.

What are the symptoms of Legionellosis?

Most cases of Legionellosis probably present with very mild symptoms. However, for those who develop more severe symptoms, there are two distinct forms. Usually, there is a flu-like illness with body aches, loss of appetite and dry cough. Within 24 hours, there are chills and fever, sometimes as high 102⁰F – 105⁰F. For those who develop the Pontiac Fever form of Legionellosis, recovery will usually be in 2 – 5 days without treatment. For those who develop the Legionnaires form of the disease, pneumonia usually develops and medical treatment is necessary.

How soon do symptoms appear?

For Pontiac fever, symptoms usually appear within 24-48 hours following exposure, although it may be anywhere from 5 hours to 66 hours following exposure. The Legionnaires form of the disease takes longer to develop, and symptoms may appear from 2 – 10 days following exposure, although most cases occur within 5-6 days after exposure.

How long can an infected person carry *Legionella*?

There is no carrier state for Legionellosis. Testing the blood of someone years after they have had the disease may reveal the presence of antibodies to *Legionella*. But this only means that they once had the disease, not that they have the disease today.

Where are the *Legionella* bacteria found?

Legionella bacteria like water, and have been isolated from ponds, creeks, lakes, and moist soil. They can also be found in many man-made environments such as hot-water tanks, water-cooling towers, fountains and even in drinking water. Because these organisms are so common and so rarely cause disease, testing of environmental samples is not usually done unless more than one person becomes ill.

What is the treatment for Legionellosis?

Antibiotics, such as erythromycin, are usually used to treat the disease.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of Legionellosis?

People who own hot tubs or spas should follow the manufacturer's directions about how often the units should be cleaned. Home hot water tanks should be maintained above 122⁰ F to prevent growth of the bacteria. Large water-cooling towers should be drained when not in use and maintained according to the directions.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your physician, nurse or clinic. Another good place to get information is the local public health agency or regional health office. Their telephone numbers are always listed in the phone book. You may also contact the Disease Investigation Unit in the Section for Prevention of Communicable Diseases at (573) 751-6113. .

**Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services
Section for Communicable Disease Prevention
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