

Fact Sheet: Legionnaires' disease (Legionellosis)

What is Legionellosis?

Legionellosis is an infection caused by the bacterium *Legionella pneumophila*. The disease occurs in two forms. Legionnaires' disease is the more severe form of infection which includes pneumonia. The other form, Pontiac fever, is a milder illness. More infections occur in the summer and early fall, but they can happen any time of the year.

Who gets the disease?

People most at risk of becoming sick from *Legionella* bacteria are: older persons (65+ years), smokers, and those with chronic lung disease.

What are the symptoms?

Legionnaires' disease can have symptoms similar to other forms of pneumonia so it may be difficult to diagnose at first.

Symptoms may include:

- High fever, chills, and cough
- Some people may also have muscle aches and headaches

These symptoms usually begin 2-14 days after exposure to the bacteria.

Pontiac fever is a milder infection with fever, headache, and muscle aches lasting 2-5 days but there is no pneumonia. These symptoms appear 24-48 hours after exposure.

How is it spread?

The *Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. The bacteria grow best in warm water, such as, in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems, or air conditioning systems in large buildings. *Legionella* bacteria do not seem to be able to grow in car or window air conditioners. People get Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever by breathing in a mist or water vapor that has been contaminated with the bacteria.

The bacteria are NOT spread from person to person.

How is it treated?

Legionnaires' disease is treated with a course of antibiotics. Antibiotic treatment is not necessary with Pontiac fever.

How is it prevented?

Cooling towers should be drained when not in use and mechanically cleaned periodically to remove scale and sediment. Tap water should not be used for respiratory therapy machines. Keeping hot water system temperatures at 122 degrees Fahrenheit or higher may reduce the risk of transmission.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

