

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE FOR FLINT RESIDENTS

## WHAT IS LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE? ---

Legionnaires' disease is a kind of pneumonia - an infection of the lungs. Like other types of pneumonia it can lead to complications, especially if not treated quickly.

## HOW DO PEOPLE GET LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE? ---

People can get Legionnaires' disease by breathing in small droplets of water (mist) that contain *Legionella* bacteria. Most people exposed to *Legionella* bacteria do not become ill.

*Legionella* bacteria occur naturally in freshwater, like lakes and streams. Large water systems, like those found in hospitals, hotels, and other large buildings, can sometimes grow *Legionella* bacteria, if they are not properly maintained. The most common sources of exposure from these types of buildings are:

- Air conditioning systems with cooling towers (tall, open-topped towers on top of buildings used to cool water)
- Hot tubs and spas
- Decorative fountains
- Potable (drinkable) water

In general, *Legionella* bacteria do not spread from one person to another. People don't get Legionnaires' disease from drinking water. However, people may be exposed to *Legionella* bacteria from water that 'goes down the wrong pipe' (aspiration).

## WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF GETTING LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE? ---

Most people exposed to *Legionella* bacteria will not get sick. There are some factors that can increase risk of getting sick, including:

- Being a smoker, or former smoker
- Being 50 years or older
- Having a chronic lung or respiratory condition, like emphysema or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Having other medical conditions such as cancer or leukemia, diabetes, kidney failure or HIV/AIDS
- Taking drugs that reduce your ability to fight infections (i.e., steroids and other drugs. If you're not sure if the drugs you are currently taking reduce your ability to fight infection, talk to your doctor.)

Legionnaires' disease is not common in children. It's a good idea to talk to your doctor to find out if you are at increased risk for getting Legionnaires' disease.

## WHEN AM I MORE LIKELY TO GET LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE? ---

*Legionella* bacteria grow more easily in warm, stagnant (not moving) water. Although people can get Legionnaires' disease at any time of year, it is more common in summer and fall when temperatures are warmer.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE? ---

Legionnaires' disease starts with flu-like symptoms such as fever, headache, muscle aches, and chills. In some people, more serious symptoms can develop in as little as 1 to 2 days, including:

- High fever
- A cough that is usually dry but sometimes produces mucus
- Difficulty breathing
- Chest pains
- Chills
- Diarrhea

## HOW IS LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE TREATED? ---

Legionnaires' disease can be treated effectively using antibiotics (drugs that kill bacteria in the body). Antibiotics work best if they are given early on in the illness. In most instances, people who get sick with Legionnaires' disease will need treatment in the hospital.

## IS THERE AN INCREASED RISK FOR LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE IN GENESEE COUNTY? ---

Each year, people in Genesee County and other Michigan counties, as well as across the United States will get Legionnaires disease. In most years, about 9 to 11 people will get Legionnaires' disease in Genesee County. Genesee County had 91 cases of Legionnaires' disease during the summers of 2014-2015. The number of people getting Legionnaires' disease is also increasing throughout the United States.

Because Legionnaires' disease can be serious, seeking medical attention quickly is very important. Finding and reporting cases of Legionnaires' disease can also help reduce the risk of other people getting sick by finding possible sources of *Legionella* bacteria early.

## WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK I HAVE LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE? ---

Seek medical attention immediately if you have symptoms of Legionnaires' disease. It is difficult to tell if it is Legionnaires' disease or another type of pneumonia, so make sure to tell your doctor if you think you may have been exposed to *Legionella* bacteria.

Your doctor can diagnose Legionnaires' disease by conducting x-rays and blood tests. Let your doctor know if you have recently been in a hot tub, stayed in a hotel or traveled.

## SHOULD I BE CONCERNED ABOUT *LEGIONELLA* IN MY HOME?

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Very few cases of Legionnaires' disease have been traced to homes. We don't know as much about *Legionella* bacteria in home water systems as we do in large building water systems. Home water systems, including water heaters, pipes, shower heads, and faucets that use water that is properly treated should be less likely to have *Legionella* bacteria.

A few studies have looked at patients who got Legionnaires' disease from their homes. From those studies, it appears that spread of *Legionella* bacteria can occur in the home but it's not clear how often this happens. *Legionella* bacteria are much less likely to contaminate the water in houses than large buildings with complex water systems. Single-family or small multiple-family residences should follow current state, county, and city guidelines for their water.

While public health experts believe the risk of getting Legionnaires' disease from a home water system is much smaller than the risk from large water systems, home owners may be able to reduce the risk further by maintaining their water systems.

**WATER HEATERS:** In some cases, *Legionella* bacteria have been found in residential water heaters. When found, it's more often been in electric water heaters than in gas water heaters. Regularly maintaining the water heater according to manufacturer's instructions is recommended to help reduce the risk of *Legionella* bacteria growth. Most manufacturers recommend that water heaters be flushed on an annual basis. If you cannot locate the manufacturer's instructions, seek the advice of a licensed plumber.

Water scientists, public health officials, and healthcare experts are currently discussing the risks and benefits of increasing the recommended water heater temperature from 120°F to 130°F which may reduce the risk of *Legionella* bacteria growing. **However, because of the risk of scalding—or being burned by hot water—this is not currently being recommended.** Updated guidelines regarding water heater management for risk prevention will be provided should recommendations change.

**SHOWERS:** Because they remain damp, shower heads could hold *Legionella* bacteria. Removing the shower head, manually cleaning it to remove scale and sediment, and soaking it in a mixture of 1 tablespoon of household bleach to 1 gallon of water for about 2 hours will disinfect the shower head.

**HUMIDIFIERS:** Some homes have whole house humidifiers. You should clean and disinfect humidifiers regularly according to manufacturer's directions. Always unplug the humidifier first. Clean the inside of the humidifier per the manufacturer's instructions, using a mixture such as 1 tablespoon of household bleach to 1 gallon of water, and dry. Thoroughly clean the outside of the humidifier before and after storage.

CPAP Machines and nebulizers should use distilled water and be cleaned per manufacturer's recommendations. If you cannot locate the manufacturer's instructions, the healthcare equipment supplier can provide them.

## HOW CAN LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE BE PREVENTED?

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Making sure that hot tubs and warm pools have the right disinfectant (i.e., chlorine) levels is important for killing *Legionella* bacteria. These disinfectant levels can be hard to maintain when water temperature is high. You do not need a special filter to remove *Legionella* bacteria in your drinking water.

Avoiding smoking is the single most important thing you can do to lower your risk of infection. Smoking increases the chances that you'll develop Legionnaires' disease if you're exposed to *Legionella* bacteria.

There are no vaccines that can help protect you from Legionnaires' disease. However, there are vaccines available that can prevent other types of pneumonia. Two types of vaccines that are especially important for preventing pneumonia are the pneumococcal and flu vaccines.

All adults 65 years or older should get both kinds of pneumococcal vaccines. And adults younger than 65 with certain health conditions or who smoke are also recommended pneumococcal vaccination. Everyone 6 months or older should get an annual flu vaccine.

*Information about maintaining home systems may be found here:*

<http://www.hvac.com/resource-center/humidifiers/articles/how-to-clean-a-whole-house-humidifier>

*More information about Legionnaires' disease is available from:*

[http://www.gchd.us/legionnaires\\_disease\\_resources.php](http://www.gchd.us/legionnaires_disease_resources.php)

<http://www.cdc.gov/legionella/index.html>

<http://www.osha.gov/dts/osta/otm/legionnaires/faq.html>

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/diseases/cdlegi.shtml>

[http://www.phila.gov/health/pdfs/diseases/Legionnaires\\_FAQ\\_2011.pdf](http://www.phila.gov/health/pdfs/diseases/Legionnaires_FAQ_2011.pdf)

