

Legionellosis

Legionellosis, or Legionnaires' disease, is a respiratory chest infection. In most people it causes no symptoms or a mild illness with symptoms similar to the flu. Older people, smokers and people with compromised immune systems are at a higher risk of Legionnaires' disease.

The legionella bacteria can be found in our environment in soil, dust and some water sources. When people breathe in the bacteria they may become infected. It does not spread from person to person, so if you have the illness you cannot pass it on to others.



How it spreads

Legionella bacteria can be found in warm water environments where temperatures are between 20°C and 45°C.

Common environments include:

- creeks, ponds and warm stagnant water sources (e.g. floodwater)
- hot water tanks, water in cooling towers
- hot tubs and spa pools
- large plumbing systems
- shower heads and sink faucets
- decorative fountains and other similar water features
- potting mix and compost.

Legionella bacteria isn't found in home and vehicle air conditioning units, so these do not pose a risk. It also can't spread from person to person, so you don't risk infecting others if you have it.



Signs and symptoms

Legionellosis varies in severity. It can cause a mild illness called Pontiac fever, or a more serious illness called Legionnaires' disease.

Mild infection (Pontiac fever)

- this is a mild illness similar to the flu causing muscle aches and fever.

Serious infection (Legionnaires' disease)

- this is a more serious illness that causes breathing difficulties and inflammation of your lungs (pneumonia) or even death
- early signs can include muscle aches, cough, tiredness, headache and loss of appetite
- these are usually followed by fever and chills, and sometimes people also feel sick or vomit, have diarrhoea or may become confused.

Legionnaires' disease symptoms can occur anywhere from two to 10 days after breathing in the bacteria.



Seeking health advice

If you think you or someone else in your household has Legionnaires' disease seek health advice from your doctor. You can also call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116. If you have difficulty breathing seek urgent help and call 111.



Treatment and recovery

Legionnaires' disease requires treatment with antibiotics to beat the infection. It is important to be diagnosed and treated quickly to help prevent complications.

People often need hospital care for Legionnaires' disease, and it can be fatal.

Pontiac fever does not typically require antibiotic treatment and people can recover at home by getting plenty of rest and drinking lots of fluids.



People at higher risk

If you breathe in the legionella bacteria, you have a higher risk of also developing Legionnaires' disease if you:

- are over 50 years old
- smoke or vape
- have an illness that affects your lungs such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- have an illness that weakens your immune system such as diabetes, cancer or kidney disease
- take medication that weakens your immune system, such as steroids.



Prevention

Legionellosis is relatively rare in New Zealand. However, you can reduce the risk to yourself and others by:

Avoiding smoking

Smokers are five times more likely to get Legionnaires' disease, as their lungs are already damaged by cigarettes.

Carefully managing private (non-reticulated) water supplies, spas and swimming pools

Legionella bacteria cannot survive in water above 60°C. Make sure your hot water cylinder is set to at least 60°C to minimise bacteria growth. Tempering valves can ensure a safe temperature at the tap to prevent scalding. Maintain spa pools by following the manufacturer's advice.

Taking precautions when working with compost and potting mix

- always work outdoors
- put on a well-fitting face mask with clean hands before starting (a N95 or respirator is best, but a blue surgical mask helps too)
- wear gloves
- open bags of compost and potting mix slowly and away from your face
- wet the compost or potting mix before handling to reduce dust
- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water after the work is done.



For more information

- healthnz.govt.nz/legionnaires-disease-legionellosis