

Legionellosis - Factsheet

What is legionellosis?

Legionellosis also called Legionnaires' disease, is caused by the bacteria called *Legionella*. The bacteria were named in 1976 when many people attending an American Legion conference in Philadelphia developed pneumonia. These bacteria, which had not been discovered until the American Legion outbreak, were found to be the cause.

What are the symptoms of legionellosis?

Legionellosis commonly causes pneumonia. Symptoms include cough, chills, high fever, and possibly muscle aches and headaches. Symptoms usually begin 2 to 14 days after being infected with the bacteria. Chest x-rays will usually show pneumonia. Other tests are often done on sputum, blood and urine to help identify the cause of pneumonia and these are helpful in diagnosing legionellosis. Illness can be severe, and hospitalization is common.

Pontiac fever is a milder infection caused by the same bacteria. People with Pontiac fever will usually develop a fever that lasts for 2 to 5 days, along with headache and muscle aches, but no pneumonia. Symptoms go away without treatment and people recover completely.

How are *Legionella* bacteria spread?

The bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. The bacteria grow best in warm water environments found in hot tubs, water towers, and air-conditioning systems of large buildings. People become infected when they breathe in mist or vapor that has been contaminated with the bacteria. One example might be from breathing in the steam from a hot tub that has not been cleaned and maintained properly.

How long are people contagious?

The bacteria are not spread from person to person.

Who gets legionellosis?

The people at greatest risk of getting legionellosis are people 65 years and older and people with weak immune systems. These include people with chronic lung disease, cancer, diabetes, kidney failure, and people taking chemotherapy or drugs that can weaken the immune system.

What treatment is available for people with legionellosis?

Legionellosis is treated with antibiotics, usually given intravenously in a hospital.

It is not recommended to treat Pontiac fever with antibiotics because the disease results from host inflammation (not bacterial replication.)