What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease, a severe form of pneumonia, is caused by breathing in droplets of water containing *Legionella*. Symptoms usually occur within 2 weeks following exposure and include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Fever
- Muscle aches
- Headaches

Who is at increased risk?

In most cases, healthy people exposed to *Legionella* do not get sick. The following people are at an increased risk of getting sick:

- People 50 years or older (especially current or former smokers)
- People with a chronic lung disease
- People with weak immune systems
- People with underlying illnesses such as diabetes, cancer, or kidney failure

What should I do if I think I have Legionnaires' Disease?

If you develop symptoms and may have been exposed to *Legionella*, see a doctor right away. Legionnaires' disease is treated with antibiotics (drugs that kill bacteria in the body). Most people who get sick need care in a hospital but make a full recovery.

More information is available at:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): https://www.cdc.gov/legionella/about/index.html
- NJ Department of Health (NJDOH): https://www.nj.gov/health/cd/topics/legion.shtml

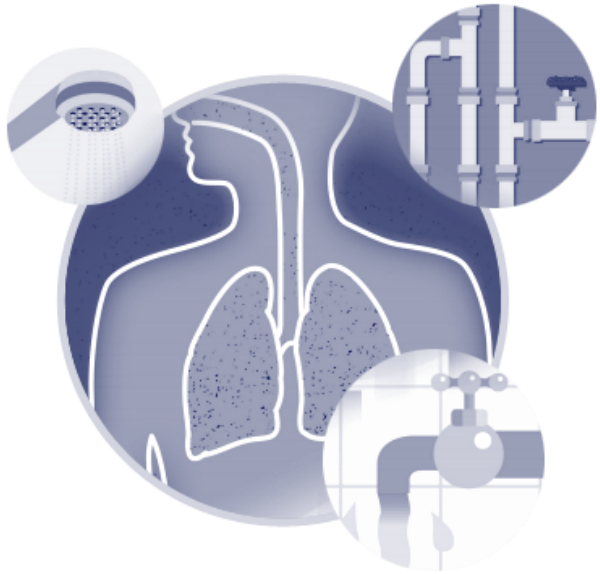
Environmental and Occupational Health Surveillance Program

Phone: (609) 826-4984 / Fax: (609) 826-4983

Communicable Disease Service

Phone: (609) 826-5964 / Fax: (609) 292-5811

Legionnaires' Disease and Your Household Water



New Jersey Department of Health

Last updated October 24, 2022

Legionnaires' Disease and Your Household Water

Legionella **is a type of bacteria found naturally in freshwater environments, like lakes and streams. It can become a health concern when it grows and spreads in human-made building water systems.**

Where does *Legionella* grow and spread?

Legionella can grow in many parts of a water system that are continually wet, and certain devices can then spread droplets of water containing the bacteria. Examples of areas where *Legionella* can grow and spread include: water heaters, water filters, faucets, aerators, showerheads, hoses, pipes, hot tubs, and respiratory equipment.

What factors or conditions can lead to the growth or spread of *Legionella* in my household water?

- Temperature of water heater is set too low
- Infrequently used showers or sinks
- Build-up of sediment (dirt) in water heater
- Not following manufacturer's instructions for maintenance and replacement of water filters and other devices

Best Practices for Preventing the Growth of *Legionella*

- **Let your faucets and showers run** for at least 3 minutes when they have been out of use for more than a week.
- **Thoroughly clean or replace your shower heads and faucet aerators** (screens) whenever buildup is visible.
- **Drain and flush your water heater according to manufacturer's instructions.** Consider hiring a licensed plumbing professional to perform this.
- **Clean and/or replace all water filters per manufacturer's instructions,** such as whole house (e.g., water softeners) and point-of-use filters (e.g., built-in refrigerator filters).
- **Remove, shorten, and/or regularly flush existing dead legs** (a section of pipe with low use). For future renovations, ensure your plumber avoids creating dead legs.
- **Avoid high-risk activities.** If you are at an increased risk for Legionnaires' disease, consider avoiding power washing, or similar activities, which may generate increased amounts of aerosols or mist.
- **Medical devices and portable humidifiers should be operated, cleaned, and disinfected** per manufacturer's instructions. Do not use tap water if sterile water is required.
- **Keep your water heater set to a minimum of 120°F.** This temperature will reduce *Legionella* growth and minimize risk of scalding. Setting the heater to a higher temperature may better control *Legionella* growth, especially if you have household members at increased risk for Legionnaires' disease, but be sure to take extra precautions to avoid scalding. You may consider installing a mixing valve if you have household members at increased risk of scalding, such as young children.
- **Drain garden hoses** and shut off the water line when not in use for the season.
- **Maintain chemical levels in your** hot tub per manufacturer's recommendations.

Home air-conditioning units are not at risk for *Legionella* growth because they do not use water to cool the air.