

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Legionellosis (Legionnaires' disease)

### TOWNSHIP OF HAMILTON

#### DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, RECREATION, SENIORS, AND VETERANS SERVICES

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#### What is Legionellosis?

Legionellosis (lee-jun-nel-OH-sis) is an infection caused by the bacterium *Legionella pneumophila*. This bacteria can cause two (2) types of illnesses:

- Legionnaires' disease – the more severe form which includes pneumonia (lung infection); or
- Pontiac fever – the milder form without pneumonia

#### Where are the bacteria that causes Legionellosis found?

These bacteria are found naturally in the environment. They can be found in creeks, ponds, hot and cold water systems (such as hot water tanks), cooling towers, spas, and soil. It can become a public health concern when it grows and spreads within human-made water systems.

#### How common is Legionellosis?

Legionellosis continues to be an uncommon disease. In New Jersey there were about 350 reported cases in 2018. This illness is likely underdiagnosed, so this number may underestimate. Generally, more illness is usually found in the summer and early fall, but it can happen any time of year.

#### Who is most at risk for infection?

Most healthy people exposed to the bacteria that causes Legionellosis do not get sick. However, individuals with certain health conditions are at an increased risk of becoming sick. Those include:

- People aged 50 years and older
- Current or former smokers
- People with chronic lung disease (such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or emphysema)
- People with weak immune systems or who take drugs that weaken the immune system (such as after a transplant)
- People with cancer
- People with underlying illnesses such as diabetes, kidney failure, or liver failure

#### How do people get Legionellosis?

People can become sick with either Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever when they breathe in small droplets of water in the air that contain the bacteria. People can breathe in small droplets of water by using a shower, hot tub, or sink. Other sources of aerosolized water may include decorative fountains and cooling towers.

Less commonly, people can get sick by aspiration of drinking water containing Legionella. This happens when water accidentally goes into the lungs while drinking. People at increased risk of aspiration include those with swallowing difficulties.

## What are the symptoms of Legionellosis?

The usual symptoms of Legionnaires' disease may include:

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

Symptoms may start 2 – 14 days after exposure to the bacteria, but most people have symptom onset day 5 or 6 after being exposed.

Pontiac fever symptoms are primarily fever and muscle aches. Symptoms begin within 24-72 hours after being exposed and usually last about a week.

## How is Legionellosis diagnosed?

Only a medical professional can diagnose Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever. Medical providers use chest x-rays or physical exams to check for pneumonia, they may also test a sample of urine or sputum (phlegm) to see if the lung infection is caused by Legionella bacteria.

## What is the treatment for Legionellosis?

Legionellosis can be treated successfully with antibiotics. It is important to follow the directions carefully and finish all of the prescribed medication unless otherwise directed by a medical provider.

## Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse, or clinic
- The Hamilton Division of Health at (609) 890-3884 or online at [www.hamiltonnj.com/health](http://www.hamiltonnj.com/health)
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at (609) 292-9560 or online at [www.nj.gov/health](http://www.nj.gov/health)



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