

## **NEW YORK STATE RESPONSE TO LEGIONELLA AND COOLING TOWERS**

### **Questions and Answers**

#### **Q: What is Legionnaires' disease?**

A: Legionnaires' disease is caused by a type of bacteria called Legionella. The bacteria grow best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, water tanks, large plumbing systems and decorative fountains that are not well maintained. The bacteria do not seem to grow in car or window air conditioners.

#### **Q: What are my chances for getting Legionnaire's Disease if I live in a neighborhood or spent time near a building that tested positive for legionella?**

A: Most healthy people do not become infected with Legionella bacteria after exposure. People at higher risk of getting sick are those 50 years of age or older, current or former smokers, those with a chronic lung disease (like COPD or emphysema), those with a weak immune system from diseases like cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure, and people who take drugs that suppress (weaken) the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy). If you are concerned about your health, you should speak with your health care provider.

#### **Q: If I visited, worked or stayed in a building (e.g. restaurant, retail store, hospital, nursing home) that tested positive, could I have become infected?**

A: Not necessarily. Legionella is so common in the environment that most people have probably been exposed to it in the past and not become ill. People at higher risk of getting sick are those 50 years of age or older, current or former smokers, those with a chronic lung disease (like COPD or emphysema), those with a weak immune system from diseases like cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure, and people who take drugs that suppress (weaken) the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy). If you remain concerned and begin to experience symptoms that include cough, shortness of breath, high fever, muscle aches, and headaches within 2-10 days after your potential exposure, contact your healthcare provider.

#### **Q: How do you get Legionnaires' Disease?**

A: People can get Legionnaires' disease if they breathe in mist or vapor containing the bacteria. The bacteria are not spread from one person to another person. A person diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease is not contagious.

#### **Q: What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?**

A: Legionnaires' disease can have symptoms like many other forms of pneumonia (lung infection), so it can be hard to diagnose at first. Signs of Legionnaires' disease can include cough, shortness of breath, high fever, muscle aches, and headaches. These symptoms usually begin 2 to 10 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

#### **Q: Is there treatment for Legionnaires' disease?**

A: Yes, most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics.

#### **Q: What should I do if I think I have Legionnaires' disease?**

A: If you have symptoms such as fever, chills and cough, call a doctor for prompt medical treatment. Be sure to let your medical provider know if you have a medical condition that affects your breathing.

**Q: I think I may have symptoms but do not have insurance. What are my options? Is there any free testing anywhere?**

A: The free testing that is being offered is for building cooling towers; not people. We are not recommending that people get tested, but if you have symptoms such as fever, chills and a cough, you should see a physician. If you don't have insurance, please call the NY State of Health help line at 1-855-355-5777 to learn more about many new low cost options.

**Q: Do I need to have the water in my hot tub tested for Legionella bacteria?**

A: The key to preventing legionellosis is maintenance of the water systems in which Legionella grow. Guidelines for appropriate water temperatures and chemical treatment of water for legionellosis prevention can be found on the CDC website at <http://www.cdc.gov/legionella/about/prevention.html>. Persons at increased risk of infection may choose to avoid high-risk exposures, such as being in or near a hot tub.

**Q: Do I need to have my drinking water tested for Legionella bacteria?**

A: No. Whether you are on public water or a private well, there is no need to test for legionella. The bacteria grow best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, water tanks, large plumbing systems and decorative fountains that are not well maintained.

**Q: Do all cooling towers have Legionella?**

A: Legionella is common in the environment and grows best in warm water, so when we test cooling towers and evaporative condensers, we are likely to find it. What is important to know is how much legionella is there. If the amount of the bacteria is high, people are more likely to be exposed and could become ill.

**Q: What kind of testing is being offered by the State Health Department?**

A: The State's Wadsworth Laboratory is providing free testing for building owners, operators, managers and landlords with cooling towers or evaporative condenser units that can be sources of Legionella. The purpose of this free service is to give building owners, operators, managers and landlords an opportunity to find out if their system contains high levels of *Legionella* and to prevent the spread of Legionnaires' disease. Legionnaires' disease is most often seen in warmer and wetter summer months when the Legionella bacteria may rapidly increase in cooling towers and spread through water droplets leaving the tower. Testing is a way to be sure the system is clean.

**Q: Is the test kit that NYS is providing related to the NYC Health Commissioner's order?**

A: No, building managers need to comply with the NYC order, while the NYS testing program is voluntary for building owners, operators, managers and landlords who choose to participate. NYS is offering free voluntary testing to building owners, operators, managers and landlords who wish to get a free sampling kit from NYS. To get a free sampling kit, they may send an e-mail with their name, phone number and shipping address to [Legionella@health.ny.gov](mailto:Legionella@health.ny.gov). Questions about the NYC Health Commissioner's order should be directed to NYC by calling 311.

**Q: How long will the free testing be offered?**

A: The testing will be available until about the beginning of October. It is the hot summer temperatures, other weather-related factors and maintenance issues that can contribute to the growth of Legionella bacteria.

**Q: I want my landlord/building owner/super to have my building tested. Can you tell me if he's testing? Can you give me the results?**

A: If you would like to have your building tested, you should talk with your landlord/building owner/super. Test results are being returned to the person who requests the test.

**Q. What does it mean if a building has a cooling tower that tested positive for Legionella bacteria?**

A: Legionella is common in the environment and when we test cooling towers and evaporative condensers, we are likely to find it, although it may include organisms that are no longer active. We look for how much legionella bacteria is there. If the amount of the bacteria is high, people are more likely to come in contact with the bacteria that causes disease and, therefore, are at increased risk to become ill. If elevated levels of bacteria are measured, building owners and operators are taking corrective measures to clean and disinfect the unit(s). Then they will retest to confirm that the problem has been addressed.

**Q. What is the State Health Department requiring the building owner to do to disinfect the cooling tower?**

A: Cooling towers may differ, so every building owner/operator will need to follow their manufacturer's specifications. There are also industry standards for inspection, cleaning and disinfection. The NYS Department of Health is advising that building owners and operators follow a *Legionella* control and management plan consistent with guidelines from the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) Standard 188. In NYC, owners of buildings with cooling towers must follow the Commissioner's Order. <http://www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/diseases/legi-comm-order.shtml>

## **OTHER QUESTIONS?**

**Call the Free Hotline: 888-769-7243 or 518-485-1159 between 8:30 and 4:30.**