Legionnaires’ disease

Infection Prevention

Information for patients

It’s OK to ask: Remind your healthcare worker about cleaning their hands

What is Legionnaires’ disease?
Legionnaires’ disease is a rare type of pneumonia. It is caused by Legionella bacteria, which are commonly found in moist environments. This includes:
- lakes, rivers and creeks
- piped water systems
- air conditioning, evaporative condensers, cooling towers
- whirlpool spas
- decorative fountains
- soil and potting mix

Legionnaires’ disease can cause serious illness, and sometimes death depending on the person’s risk factors. Most infections occur in people over the age of 50. It is extremely rare in children.

Who is at risk of Legionnaires’ disease?
Most people who are exposed to the bacteria will not become infected and develop Legionnaires’ disease. Those who may be at increased risk of Legionnaires’ disease include:
- men over 50 years of age
- heavy smokers
- heavy drinkers
- diabetics
- people with chronic lung disease
- people with weakened immune systems

What are the symptoms of Legionnaires?
Legionnaires’ disease causes pneumonia. Symptoms are usually flu-like and might include:
- headaches, fevers, muscle aches, tiredness, lack of appetite
- shortness of breath and a dry cough
- abdominal pain, diarrhoea, confusion, kidney failure

Symptoms appear 2-10 days after exposure. Legionnaires’ disease most commonly occurs in autumn.

How is Legionnaires’ disease treated?
It is usually treated with antibiotics. This treatment may take place in hospital but all cases are different. Early diagnosis and treatment make the illness less severe.
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How does Legionnaires’ disease spread?
*Legionella* is found in water. A person may get Legionnaires’ disease by breathing in very fine droplets of water called aerosols that contain the bacteria.

You cannot ‘catch’ Legionnaires’ disease from another person. Isolation rooms in hospital are not necessary.

How can we prevent Legionnaires’ disease?
There is no vaccine available to prevent Legionnaires’ disease.

Wearing a facemask and gloves while handling potting mix may help you avoid exposure to the bacteria.

The most important preventative measure is regular testing and maintenance of water systems, cooling towers and public baths.

At Alfred Health, we test the cooling towers and water systems regularly according to the Victorian public health laws*.

*Public Health & Wellbeing Regulations 2009
*Public Health & Wellbeing Act 2008

What do my visitors need to do?
It is important to protect patients, visitors and staff from any infections in the hospital.

We recommend that all visitors clean their hands with either alcohol based hand rub, or soap and water.
It is important to do this before going into your room, when caring for you, and when leaving your room.

It also essential all visitors only ‘visit when well’ if visiting you in hospital.

Any questions?
For more information about Legionnaires’ disease, please contact the Alfred Health Infection Prevention & Healthcare Epidemiology Unit on 9076 3139.

Any questions?
If you would like further information about Legionnaires’ contact Alfred Health Infection Prevention on (03) 9076 3139.

Further information:
Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

National Safety & Quality
www.safetyandquality.gov.au/

If you would like to provide feedback or request a copy in a different format, contact us at patient.info@alfred.org.au