Factsheet: Legionnaires' disease

HSC Public Health Agency

What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease is an infection that can cause pneumonia. You can get this infection by inhaling droplets from water sources like air conditioning or hot tubs that have become contaminated with the bacteria causing this disease. It's uncommon but can be very serious.

Most infections are isolated cases, but outbreaks of the disease may occur.

What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

Early symptoms of Legionnaires' disease include a flu-like illness with muscle aches, fatigue, headaches, dry cough, and fever. Sometimes diarrhoea and confusion can occur. These symptoms may lead to pneumonia which can require a hospital stay, intensive care and in some cases can be fatal. Infection can be more severe in certain groups of people.

Who gets Legionnaires' disease?

It can affect people of all ages. However, risk of infection increases with age and some groups are at higher risk including:

- people over 45 years of age;
- individuals with chronic conditions, such as heart, lung and kidney disease;
- smokers;
- people with weakened immune systems.

How quickly do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear from 2 to 10 days after cases, some people may develop symptoms as late as three weeks after exposure.

How is it diagnosed?

A diagnosis can be made by examining a patient's sputum or urine sample when the right symptoms appear.

If I am diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease, are my family and friends at risk of infection?

No, person to person spread is rare. Family and friends would only be at risk if they contracted the disease from the same water source.

What is the treatment?

Treatment for Legionnaires' disease is with antibiotics.

What if I suspect I have Legionnaires' disease?

If you suspect infection with this disease, you should inform your doctor who can start the appropriate tests as needed.

How widespread is this disease?

Cases have been reported in all industrialised countries. In Northern Ireland, 68 cases were reported between 2014 and 2024.

HSC Public Health Agency

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