



Mecklenburg County Health Department



Legionnaires Disease Causes and Common Sources of Infection

Legionella is a type of bacterium 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 like

- Shower heads and sink faucets
- Cooling towers (structures that contain water and a fan as part of centralized air-cooling systems for building or industrial processes)
- Hot tubs that aren't drained after each use
- Decorative fountains and water features
- Hot water tanks and heaters
- Large plumbing systems

How It Spreads

- After **Legionella** grows and multiplies in a building water system, water containing **Legionella** then must spread in droplets small enough for people to breathe in. People can get Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever when they breathe in small droplets of water in the air that contain the bacteria.
- 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.
- In general, people do not spread Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever to other people.

Signs and Symptoms

Legionnaires' disease is very similar to other types of pneumonia (lung infection), with symptoms that include:

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

Legionnaires' disease can also be associated with other symptoms such as diarrhea, nausea, and confusion. Symptoms usually begin 2 to 10 days after being exposed to the bacteria, but it can take longer so people should watch for symptoms for about 2 weeks after exposure.

Source Reference: <https://www.cdc.gov/legionella/about/signs-symptoms.html>

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