

Fact Sheet on *Legionella* and *Legionella* pneumonia

VISN 5 is committed to providing the safe, high-quality care that Veterans have earned and deserved. VA medical centers located in the national capitol region are proactive in minimizing the risk of *Legionella* and creating a safe environment for all our Veterans, employees, volunteers and visitors.

What is *Legionella*?

Legionella is a bacterium found naturally in the environment; *L. pneumophila* is the primary human pathogenic bacterium that causes *Legionella* pneumonia.

Why is it in our water?

Almost all natural water sources contain *Legionella*, and the bacteria grow best in warm water.

How does *Legionella* lead to *Legionella* pneumonia?

Most healthy individuals do not become infected with *Legionella* bacteria after exposure. Some people can develop *Legionella* pneumonia after breathing in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) containing the bacteria.

The people at higher risk of getting sick are:

- Older people (60 years or older)
- Current or former smokers
- Those with a chronic lung disease (like Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or emphysema)
- Those with a weak immune system from diseases like cancer, diabetes or kidney failure
- Those who take drugs that suppress the immune system (such as after a transplant operation or chemotherapy)

Can *Legionella* pneumonia be transmitted from person to person?

No, the bacteria cannot be spread directly from person to person through sneezing or coughing.

Can I get *Legionella* pneumonia from drinking tap water?

Generally speaking, a person cannot get *Legionella* pneumonia just by drinking water. To be infected, they must breathe in mist or vapors containing the bacteria.

What are the symptoms of *Legionella* pneumonia?

Legionella pneumonia can have symptoms like many other forms of pneumonia.

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Signs of *Legionella* pneumonia can include cough, shortness of breath, high fever, muscle aches and headaches. These symptoms usually begin 2 to 14 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

How do we confirm that someone has *Legionella* pneumonia?

No single clinical test by itself can diagnose *Legionella* pneumonia. After a patient is diagnosed with pneumonia, the facility uses a urinary antigen test to confirm the patient has *Legionella* pneumonia. A urinary antigen test is simple and quick and detects *Legionella* pneumonia in most cases.

How do we treat *Legionella* pneumonia?

Legionella pneumonia requires treatment with common antibiotics.

What is the plan to prevent *Legionella*?

VISN 5 facilities have instituted *Legionella* prevention strategies in buildings in which patients, residents, or visitors stay overnight. They include:

- Establishing multi-disciplinary Facility Water Safety Committees to focus on operation, testing and maintenance of the potable water system
- Regularly monitoring of water temperatures and oxidant levels
- Quarterly *Legionella* sampling of the potable water system
- Regular maintenance and testing of cooling towers
- Engineering upgrades on water distribution systems

If *Legionella pneumophila* is present in the water system, the site will conduct remediation and heightened clinical surveillance of at-risk patients.