

Fact Sheet: Legionnaires' Disease in the South Bronx

About Legionnaires' disease:

- Legionnaires' disease (or Legionellosis) is a common type of pneumonia caused by a bacterium called *Legionella*.
- Legionnaires' disease is NOT contagious. It cannot be spread from person to person, and it is treatable with antibiotics. As with any infection, early diagnosis is desirable. The vast majority recover from the infection.

Cases in New York City:

- 46 Legionella reports have been received from laboratories since July 10, 2015, and most of the cases have been reported from the South Bronx neighborhoods of High Bridge-Morrisania and Hunts Point-Mott Haven.
- 9 of the 46 reported cases have been treated and discharged.
- There have been two deaths (both occurring in the middle of July) reported.
- Following the two deaths, the Health Department began aggressive investigation into the cause.

What the City is doing to protect New Yorkers:

- The City quickly identified two cooling towers – one at Lincoln Hospital and one at Concourse Plaza – that tested positive for *Legionella*, and notified the owners to take action immediately. Both cooling towers are being decontaminated immediately.
- The Health Department continues to aggressively test other possible sources, and is testing 10 additional sites surrounding the affected area today.
- The Health Department is also investigating the laboratory reports to determine whether cases are due to a common exposure.

What New Yorkers should know:

- Groups at high risk for Legionnaires' disease include people who are middle-aged or older, especially cigarette smokers, as well as people with chronic lung disease or weakened immune systems, and people who take medicines that weaken their immune systems (immunosuppressive drugs).
- Symptoms include fever, cough, and difficulty breathing.
- People can get sick from inhaling contaminated mists from cooling towers, showers, faucets, and whirlpool spas. The disease occurs most commonly in the summer and fall.
- Anyone concerned about the disease should seek care from a physician or go to the nearest emergency room.

Q&A

Q: Have any staff at Lincoln Hospital gotten the disease?

A: Lincoln Hospital has not had any patients or staff get the disease at the facility.

Q: What is a cooling tower?

A: A rooftop cooling system.

Q: What does the decontamination process entail?

A: There are many different designs, sizes and complexities of cooling towers in New York City, and the means of cleaning, disinfecting and maintaining them differ. Remediating a cooling tower may involve flushing, removal of biofilm, cleaning, mechanical repair, and/or use of one or more disinfectants one or more times. This process can be completed as quickly as within a day.

Q: Should people in the South Bronx stop drinking the water and taking showers?

A: No, not at all. The New York City water supply does not pose a risk, and this investigation does not suggest that the source is a building's plumbing system. *Legionella* is spread through inhaling mist.

Q: What percentage of cases are fatal?

A: Generally, 5 to 10 percent of cases are fatal.

Q: What is the incubation period?

A: Symptoms usually begin two to ten days after being exposed to the bacteria, but sometimes longer. Symptoms of Legionnaires' disease can include fever, chills, and cough. Other symptoms are muscle aches, headaches, tiredness, loss of appetite, confusion and occasionally diarrhea. Legionnaires' disease can mimic other types of pneumonia, so it may go unrecognized at first.

Q: Is the City going to test cooling towers moving forward?

A: Yes, we continue to test cooling towers in areas of the South Bronx.

Q: Is this a result of old infrastructure?

A: The age of buildings and their cooling systems is not the issue. Cooling towers need to be maintained and checked by building owners. Proper maintenance prevents the buildup of organic material on which the bacteria feeds.