

Legionnaires Disease (Pontiac Fever)

What is Legionnaires Disease?

A bacterial infection called legionellosis can cause two different illnesses: Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever. Legionnaires disease is a type of pneumonia. Pontiac fever is a milder flu-like illness without pneumonia. Legionella bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. The bacteria grow best in warm water (hot water systems, air conditioning towers, humidifiers, spas, etc.)

What are the symptoms?

Legionnaires disease can have symptoms like many other forms of pneumonia, so it can be hard to diagnose at first. Symptoms can include high fever, chills and a cough, as well as fatigue, headache, aching muscles, chest pain, and loss of appetite. Sometimes there is also nausea, diarrhea, or a change in a person's mental condition, including confusion or memory loss. There is a progressive respiratory distress.

Pontiac fever causes flu-like illness. The symptoms may include fever, lack of appetite, headache, and aching muscles. Pontiac fever is not associated with pneumonia. In most cases, no treatment is required, and people recover within two to five days.

Who is at risk?

People 65 years of age and older are most at risk for serious disease. People who are smokers, those with chronic lung disease or weak immune systems (diabetes, cancer, transplant patients) are also at higher risk. Even with treatment, Legionnaires disease can cause death in up to five to 30 per cent of people with pre-existing severe medical problems.

When do symptoms start?

After coming in contact with the bacteria, symptoms for Legionnaires disease can start in two to 10 days (most often five to six days), and symptoms for Pontiac fever can start in five to 66 hours (most often 24 to 48 hours).

When is it contagious?

Legionella bacteria are NOT spread from one person to another person. People become infected by breathing in mist or steam containing the bacteria. Single cases of Legionnaires disease are more common, but outbreaks do occur and have been reported in hospitals, hotels, large buildings and on cruise ships where several people have been exposed to the same source of infection.

How is it treated?

Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics.

How can the spread of Legionnaires disease be reduced?

In your home, you can minimize risks through the proper maintenance of all mist-producing devices such as showerheads, hot tubs, whirlpools and humidifiers. Clean and disinfect these devices regularly.

What should I do if I get sick with Legionnaires disease?

Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill. If you have reason to believe that you were exposed to the bacteria, talk to your doctor or local health department.

