

# Legionnaires' Disease

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## What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' (LEE-juh-nares) disease is a type of pneumonia (lung infection) caused by bacteria called *Legionella*. The bacteria got the name in 1976 after many people who went to a Philadelphia convention of the American Legion became ill from the disease.

## Where do Legionella bacteria come from?

*Legionella* bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in water. The bacteria grow best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems, or parts of the air-conditioning systems of large buildings.

## How do people get Legionnaires' disease?

People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) that has been contaminated with the bacteria. One example might be from breathing in the steam from a whirlpool spa that has not been properly cleaned and disinfected. Other infections have been linked to aerosol sources such as cooling towers (air-conditioning units from large buildings) and water used for drinking and bathing.

The bacteria are NOT spread from one person to another person.

## Who gets this disease?

People most at risk of getting sick from the bacteria are older people (usually 65 years or older), people who smoke or have chronic lung disease (like emphysema), and those who have weak immune systems from cancer, diabetes, kidney failure, medications, or other medical conditions.

## What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease can have symptoms like many other types of pneumonia, so it can be hard to diagnose at first. Signs of the disease can include a high fever, chills, and a cough. Some people also have muscle aches or headaches.

A milder infection caused by the same type of *Legionella* bacteria is called **Pontiac Fever**. The symptoms of Pontiac Fever usually last for 2 to 5 days and may also include fever, headaches, and muscle aches; however, there is no pneumonia. Symptoms go away on their own without treatment and without causing further problems.

Pontiac Fever and Legionnaires' disease are also called "Legionellosis" (LEE-juh-nuh-low-sis).

## **How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?**

Symptoms usually begin 2 to 10 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

## **How is Legionnaires' disease diagnosed?**

Most people with Legionnaires' disease get pneumonia (lung infection) since the *Legionella* bacteria grow and thrive in the lungs. Pneumonia is confirmed either by chest x-ray or clinical diagnosis. Several laboratory tests can be used to detect the *Legionella* bacteria in the body. The most common laboratory test is the urinary antigen test, which detects *Legionella* bacteria from a urine sample. *Legionella* bacteria can also be cultured (grown) in a laboratory from respiratory secretions.

## **How serious is it? What is the treatment?**

Legionnaires' disease can be very serious and can be fatal in 5 percent to 30 percent of cases. Most people can be treated successfully with specific antibiotics (drugs that kill bacteria in the body).

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