DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Legionella and Drinking Water

SUMMARY TALKING POINTS

What is *Legionella*?

Legionella is a bacterium commonly found in natural and man-made aquatic environments. *Legionella* can be found at low concentrations in any public water system.

Legionella only poses a health risk when growth occurs in warm stagnant water, the water is aerosolized, and the small droplets are inhaled. *Legionella* generally does not pose a health risk if a person drinks the water.

Those that are infected may develop legionellosis, a type of pneumonia called Legionnaires' disease, or a flu-like illness called Pontiac fever.

Where do *Legionella* grow and spread?

Stagnant and standing water in a plumbing system increases the risk for growth and spread of *Legionella*. When water is stagnant, the hot water temperatures can decrease. Temperatures that are warm but not too hot are optimal for *Legionella* growth.

The bacteria become a health concern when the grow in spread in water systems like:

- Showerheads and sink faucets
- Cooling towers (water-containing structures that are part of centralized air cooling systems)
- Hot tubs
- Decorative water fountains and water features
- Hot water tanks and heaters
- Large, complex plumbing systems

Sources: Reopening Buildings After Prolonged Shutdown or Reduced Operation (CDC); Legionella: Causes, How it Spreads, and People at Increased Risk (CDC)

How can people protect themselves from *Legionella* exposure?

You can take steps to protect yourself from waterborne germs in your home:

- Flushing shower heads and faucets that have not been used recently.
- Clean showerhead and faucet aerators.
- Clean and maintain all devices that use water, such as portable humidifiers.
- Set your hot water heater above 120°F and regularly flush following manufacturer recommendations.

What are measures that buildings can take to minimize risks from *Legionella?*

Owners and managers of buildings and facilities should develop a water management plan and consider the following action items:

- Regularly flush plumbing where water may be stagnant, warm, and/or aerosolized.
- Clean cooling towers on a regular basis.
- If monitoring water quality, measure temperature, pH, and free and total chlorine residuals. Measuring total chlorine residual may be adequate for most facilities.
- Regular sampling is important and can occur weekly, on the same day, same time, at designated locations.
- Remove dead ends in the plumbing system.
- Increase water temperature and add anti-scalding valves.

It is important to keep in regular contact with your community water system when developing and implementing a water management plan.

For more information, see *Legionella* Information for Community Public Water Systems, Health Care Facilities, and All Types of Buildings (PDF) and Overview of Water Management Programs (CDC).

For more information

- About Legionnaire's Disease, MDH
- *Legionella* Information for Community Public Water Systems, Health Care Facilities, and All Types of Buildings (PDF), MDH
- Legionella (Legionnaires' Disease and Pontiac Fever), CDC
- Preventing Waterborne Germs at Home, CDC
- Overview of Water Management Programs, CDC
- *Legionella* and Water Management Plans (PDF), Washington State Department of Health

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