

Cluster of Legionnaires' disease Associated with an Area of Ashworth Avenue in Hampton, New Hampshire

Frequently Asked Questions

September 6, 2018

What is the situation in Hampton with Legionnaires' disease?

The New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services' Division of Public Health Services (DPHS) has identified **15 people** with Legionnaires' disease, a potentially serious bacterial pneumonia (lung infection) caused by *Legionella* bacteria. One of these people, an elderly adult, has died due to complications of Legionnaire's disease. These people likely acquired their infections between early June and mid-August in the Hampton Beach area.

Where is it coming from?

DPHS and experts from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are working diligently to identify a potential source of the bacteria and possible additional cases of Legionnaire's disease. The majority of cases stayed or resided in the Ashworth Avenue area between Island Path and M Street but may have had other exposures in the area. As a precautionary measure, DPHS has closed the hot tub spas at the Sands Resort and the Harris Sea Ranch Motel because hot tub spas in general are a known source of the bacteria that causes Legionnaire's. The hot tubs no longer present a potential risk to the public. Preliminary laboratory testing has identified Legionella bacteria in the hot tub and other locations in the Sands Resort water system. NH DHHS is continuing to investigate the cause of this outbreak and is waiting for additional testing of samples taken from the Sands and other locations during the community investigation to be completed.

What is DPHS doing about this situation?

DPHS continues to work closely with the Town of Hampton, the Department of Environmental Services and the US CDC. We are investigating possible additional cases and investigating the source of these infections. DPHS has closed the implicated hot tubs until

further notice, and they no longer present a potential risk to the public. DPHS is also working with local business and residents to minimize economic impact to the community. NH DHHS has issued a public health order on the Sands Resort requiring the establishment to notify guests of the potential risk of Legionnaires' disease if they stay at the resort. The Sands Resort is also required to hire a company to try to get rid of the bacteria that may be present in the hotel.

Who do I call with questions about this situation?

If you have information or questions about this situation, please call the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services. A public inquiry phone line is available to answer questions from 8am -4pm, including over the weekend, by calling 603-271-9461, or for those calling from within New Hampshire, toll-free at 1-800-852-3345 ext 9461.

What is Legionnaires' disease and how common is it in New Hampshire?

Legionnaires' disease is a very serious type of pneumonia caused by bacteria called *Legionella*. Between 12 and 63 cases are reported each year in New Hampshire with an average of 32. Most cases occur as single isolated events. Outbreaks are rare in New Hampshire.

Why is it called Legionnaires' disease?

An outbreak of this disease in Philadelphia in 1976, largely among people attending a state convention of the American Legion, led to the name "Legionnaires' disease." Subsequently, the bacterium causing the illness was named *Legionella pneumophila*.

How severe is the illness?

Legionnaires' disease is a very serious type of pneumonia that can be severe enough to cause death. About 1 in 10 people who get Legionnaires' disease will die from the infection.

Where are *Legionella* bacteria found?

Legionella bacteria exist naturally in water and moist soil. They have been found in creeks and ponds, hot and cold water taps, hot water tanks, water in air conditioning cooling towers and evaporative condensers, hot tubs, decorative fountains, and soil at excavation sites.

How is Legionnaires' disease spread?

People can get Legionnaires' disease by breathing in small droplets of water in the air (e.g., mist) containing *Legionella* bacteria. Less commonly, someone can breathe in *Legionella* when water accidentally goes into the lungs while drinking. In general, people do not spread Legionnaires' disease to other people. However, this may be possible under rare circumstances.

Who gets Legionnaires' disease?

Most healthy individuals do not become infected with *Legionella* bacteria after exposure. People at increased risk of getting sick are those 50 years of age or older, current or former smokers, those with a chronic lung disease (like COPD or emphysema), those with a weak immune system from diseases like AIDS, cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure, and people who take drugs that suppress (weaken) the immune system (like after an organ transplant or chemotherapy).

What are the usual symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

The early symptoms of Legionnaires' disease may be flu-like with muscle aches, headache, tiredness and dry cough followed by fever, chills and occasionally diarrhea. Like with other types of pneumonia, common symptoms of Legionnaires' disease include rapid breathing or difficulty breathing and chest pain.

How soon do symptoms occur/appear?

The incubation period for Legionnaires' disease ranges from two to 10 days, but is usually five to six days. Sometimes it can take longer so people should watch for symptoms for about two weeks after exposure.

How can I get tested?

If you are not ill, you do not need to be tested for this infection. If you have symptoms consistent with pneumonia, then you should be seen by a healthcare provider. Your healthcare provider may perform a chest x-ray. They may also test your urine or do a laboratory test that involves taking a sample of sputum (phlegm) or washing from the lung. It is best to get both kinds of samples. The test results for these laboratory tests can take a few days to a week or more to get the results back.

I don't have insurance but have been sick and need to get tested?

A healthcare provider must see you to evaluate your symptoms and decide if testing is appropriate. Unfortunately there is no way for us to provide you with this evaluation.

What is the treatment?

Legionnaires' disease requires treatment with antibiotics (medicines that kill bacteria in the body), and most cases of this illness can be treated successfully. Healthy people usually get better after being sick with Legionnaires' disease, but they often need care in the hospital.

I think I have (or had) Legionnaire's disease. What do I do?

If you have questions about your health, please contact your healthcare provider. If you have information or questions about this cluster, please call 603-271-9461.

I have been diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease, is my family at risk?

There is very little risk that you can spread this infection to your family.

I visited Hampton, NH. What do I do?

If your visit was longer than 14 days ago, you are beyond the usual time it takes to develop disease. If your visit was within 14 days, your risk of disease is very low. If you become ill, share your travel history and concerns with your primary care clinician and s/he can test, treat and report, if appropriate. If your visit was within 14 days, and you are not ill, there is no recommendation for you to be tested or take antibiotics.

I live in Hampton, NH. What do I do?

Although risk is low, DPHS recommends that people who are at higher risk of Legionnaire's disease should continue to take steps to protect their health, including consideration of avoiding the area of Ashworth avenue if they are concerned about their health and talking to their healthcare providers. People who are at increased risk include those who are 50 or older, who have chronic respiratory disease, or who have a weakened immune system. People who elect to travel should avoid going into hot tubs.

I have a trip planned to Hampton, NH. Should I cancel?

While the investigation is underway, in an abundance of caution, DPHS recommends that people who are at higher risk of Legionnaire's disease should continue to take steps to protect their health, including consideration of postponing their visit to the area if they are concerned about their health and talking to their healthcare providers. People who are at increased risk include those who are 50 or older, who have chronic respiratory disease, or who have a weakened immune system. People should avoid going into hot tubs.

I cancelled my reservation or tickets for an event and was not provided a refund. What can I do?

You will need to work directly with the establishment or company to request a refund. Different companies may have different refund policies and you will need to work with the company directly to resolve the matter.

Should I wear a mask in town?

In general, we do not have evidence that this will help prevent disease. We are working to identify the source and may update this as we learn more.

Can I catch Legionnaire's from other people?

It is extremely unlikely for Legionnaires' disease to spread from person to person.

Should I stay indoors?

Since we have no evidence whether the *Legionella* bacteria are in an outdoor or indoor water source, we do not recommend staying indoors at this time. DPHS is actively investigating where the *Legionella* bacteria are coming from, but we do not know yet. As we learn more, we may change our recommendations about areas to avoid.

Can I get Legionnaire's Disease from my home air conditioning unit?

No. Legionella grows and spreads in water sources. Home and car air-conditioning units do not use water to cool the air, so they are not a risk for *Legionella* growth.

Should I drink bottled water?

DPHS has not made a recommendation to avoid drinking tap water.

Can I get Legionnaire's Disease from swimming in the ocean?

No. Legionnaire's disease is usually acquired by inhaling aerosol droplets of water containing *Legionella* bacteria. Sources of the aerosol droplets can include showers, hot tubs, faucets, cooling towers, misters, and decorative fountains.

Should the DPHS or town cancel events or close hotels in town?

While we believe that the current overall health risk to the community is low, DPHS is actively investigating where the *Legionella* bacteria are coming from. We are concerned by the preliminary test results at the Sands Resort and have taken steps to address these concerns with the establishment through a public health order. There are additional cases that did not stay at the Sands Resort and we are working to identify the source of these infections. In some situations, the source of the bacteria is never identified. If we identify the source, we will do whatever it takes to prevent additional transmission.

Why didn't DPHS close the Sands Resort?

The public's health is our main priority. We continue to intensively and collaboratively investigate all possible sources of the *Legionella* bacteria. In consultation with CDC and Town officials, we are requiring the Sands Resort to remediate the outbreak, including notifications to all past, current and future guests of the presence of Legionella in the water system at the Sands and immediate water treatment to remove the Legionella bacteria through effective, standard methods. The Sands Resort is currently complying with these requirements to assure there are no *Legionella* present in the establishment. We are continuing to investigate and if we find more *Legionella* bacteria or if new illnesses are identified, we may take additional measures to protect the public.

How does Legionella grow and multiply in a building water system?

A variety of internal and external factors, such as water main breaks, water temperature fluctuations, and inadequate levels of disinfectant, can lead to a *Legionella* problem in a building. *Legionella* grows and spreads in building water systems that have inadequate levels of disinfectant or temperature fluctuations allowing for Legionella bacteria to grow and spread, including in devices such as hot water tanks, showerheads, and hot tubs. It is critical that building owners and managers take steps to reduce the risk of *Legionella* in their buildings.

Should I be concerned about drinking the municipal water in Hampton, NH?

No. People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in small droplets of water in the air that contain the bacteria, not by drinking it.

How do I get my water tested or treated?

DPHS is not currently recommending that Hampton residents test or treat their water. The CDC has developed resources on how businesses that have devices that may make small droplets of water, such as shower heads, hot tub spas, and decorative fountains, can properly manage their water systems to prevent Legionnaire's disease available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/legionella/wmp/index.html>

Where can I learn more about Legionnaires' disease and this outbreak?

General information on Legionnaires' disease is available on the CDC website at: <https://www.cdc.gov/legionella/index.html>

Information about this outbreak is available on the NH DHHS website at: <https://www.dhhs.nh.gov/dphs/cdcs/legionella.htm>

NH DHHS will continue to report results and updates as they become available and relevant for public health.