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Fact Sheet

Legionella Pneumonia (Legionnaires' Disease)

Background on Legionella Pneumonia (Legionnaires' Disease):

Legionella is a bacterium commonly found in the environment, particularly in warm water. Legionella bacteria can cause two different illnesses: A kind of pneumonia (lung disease) called Legionnaire's disease, and a milder infection without pneumonia, known as Pontiac fever. People can come in contact with Legionella when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) containing the bacteria. Most people who come in contact with the bacteria do not become ill.

Key points:

- Legionnaires' disease is a form of pneumonia caused by the Legionella bacteria.
- Symptoms include high fever, chills, cough, body aches, headache and fatigue. Individuals with Legionnaires' disease may need to be hospitalized. The disease typically begins 2–10 days after exposure to the bacteria. It can be treated effectively with antibiotics.
- Legionella bacteria are found naturally in the environment, usually in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems and decorative fountains. They do not seem to grow in car or window air-conditioners.
- People can get infected when they breathe in a mist or vapor (small droplets of water in the air) that has been contaminated with Legionella bacteria.
- Legionella does *not* spread from person-to-person.
- Most people who are exposed to the Legionella bacteria do not become ill.
- People at higher risk of getting sick are:
 - Older people (usually 50 years of age or older)

<http://www.longleafneuromedical.ncdhhs.gov/>

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- Current or former smokers
 - Those with a chronic lung disease (like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD] or emphysema)
 - Those with a weak immune system from diseases like cancer, diabetes, or kidney failure
 - People who take drugs that suppress (weaken) the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy)
- Environmental testing for Legionella is not routinely done, as these bacteria are commonly found in the environment. However, environmental testing may be performed, under certain circumstances, as part of a legionellosis outbreak investigation. Clinical isolates are necessary to interpret the investigational findings.
 - CDC estimates that between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease in the United States each year. However, only about 3,000 cases are reported to CDC each year.
 - Over the past five years, an average of 74 legionella cases were reported annually in North Carolina.
 - Physicians and laboratories are required by law to report cases of legionella infections to public health officials so they can rapidly assess risk and institute control measures to prevent additional cases from occurring.

