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Health Department

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Legionnaires' Disease

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What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease is a type of pneumonia (lung infection). It is caused by a type of bacteria called *Legionella*. The bacteria are found naturally in the environment and grow best in warm water, such as the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems, or parts of air-conditioning systems of large buildings. *Legionella* bacteria can cause Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever, collectively known as Legionellosis.

How do people get Legionnaires' disease?

People can get the disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor that has been contaminated with the bacteria. An example is breathing in the steam from a whirlpool spa that has not been properly cleaned and disinfected. Legionnaires' disease can not spread from one person to another.

What are the symptoms of Legionnaires' disease?

Signs of the disease can include a high fever, chills and a cough. Some people may also have muscle aches and headaches. Symptoms usually begin two to 14 days after being exposed to the bacteria.

How is Legionnaire's disease treated?

Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics. Healthy people usually recover from infection. However, the disease can be very serious and causes death in five percent to 30 percent of those infected.

What should I do if I think I was exposed to *Legionella* bacteria?

Contact your health care provider. Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill. People most at-risk of getting sick include:

- Individuals over the age of 65 years
- Smokers
- Individuals with a chronic lung disease (like emphysema)
- People with weakened immune systems

How can you prevent Legionnaires' disease?

Measures can be taken to reduce the likelihood of exposure. For example, large air conditioning systems with cooling towers and evaporative condensers should be operated and maintained according to manufacturers' recommendations. Because *Legionella* bacteria are found throughout the environment, testing potential sources is not recommended when individual cases occur.

For More Information:

Contact the Sedgwick County Health Department Epidemiology Office at 316-660-7392 or visit the Sedgwick County website at www.sedgwickcounty.org.