



# Legionellosis Fact Sheet (Legionnaires' disease, Pontiac fever)

## **What is legionellosis?**

Legionellosis is a disease caused by Legionella bacteria. There are two forms of the disease, **Legionnaires' disease** and **Pontiac fever**. Most cases occur as single isolated events but outbreaks have occurred, such as the one in Philadelphia in 1976 among a group of persons attending a convention of the American Legion. This is where the name "Legionnaires' disease" came from.

## **Where are Legionella bacteria found?**

Legionella can be found in any type of water system. They have been found in the environment in creeks and ponds and potting soil. The bacteria are prevalent in warm stagnant water such as those found in most plumbing systems, hot water tanks, water in cooling towers, evaporative condensers of large air conditioning systems and hot tubs. Home and automobile air conditioners are NOT a source of Legionella bacteria. Because these organisms are so common and usually do not cause disease, testing of the environment is not usually done unless more than one person becomes ill.

## **What are the symptoms of legionellosis?**

Legionellosis has two clinically and epidemiologically distinct manifestations: **Legionnaires' disease** and **Pontiac fever**. Both illnesses are characterized by anorexia, malaise, myalgia, headache, and fever; however, **Legionnaires' disease** is associated with pneumonia, while **Pontiac fever** is a milder illness without evidence of pneumonia. Persons suffering from Pontiac Fever usually recover within 2-5 days without treatment.

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

The symptoms for Legionnaires' disease appear anywhere from 2-10 days after exposure to the organism, usually within 5-6 days. For Pontiac fever, the incubation period is shorter, between 5-66 hours, most often 24-48 hours.

## **What is the treatment for legionellosis?**

Specific antibiotics prescribed by a physician may be used to treat legionellosis. However, with Pontiac fever persons usually recover within 2-5 days without treatment.

## **How can legionellosis be prevented?**

Prevention of legionellosis is based upon proper maintenance of heating, cooling and plumbing systems. Commercial cooling towers should be drained when not in use and cleaned periodically to remove scale and sediment. Hot water tanks should be maintained at 122oF to prevent growth of the bacteria. Persons with hot tubs and whirlpool baths should take special care to keep them clean and free of Legionella bacteria.