

MEDIA RELEASE

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RE: Legionnaires' Disease in Genesee County

The Genesee County Health Department (GCHD) would like to remind residents of the risk of Legionnaires' disease as it is most common during the summer and early fall months. Legionnaires' disease is a respiratory infection characterized by the bacteria *Legionella*. A milder form of the illness is called Pontiac fever. Legionnaires' symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, muscle ache, headache, pneumonia, and sometimes diarrhea and mental changes. Pontiac fever has similar symptoms but does not progress to pneumonia. Antibiotics are highly effective against *Legionella* bacteria. To date, there have been 9 cases reported in Genesee County for 2017.

Legionella bacteria are found naturally in the environment (rivers, lakes, streams), but can also be found in man-made water supplies that aerosolize water, such as cooling towers, hot water tanks, humidifiers, nebulizers, showers, hot tubs, and decorative fountains. People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor containing the bacteria. The bacteria are not spread from one person to another person. One cannot become ill from swallowing water containing *Legionella* bacteria. However, people may be exposed to *Legionella* bacteria from water that "goes down the wrong pipe" (aspiration). Filtering water does not remove *Legionella* bacteria. People who have an increased risk of developing Legionnaires' disease are those who are over age 50, current or former smokers, immunocompromised, or who have other underlying chronic health

conditions and weakened immune systems from diseases, such as cancer, diabetes, chronic lung disease, liver or kidney failure. Individuals with any concerns about Legionnaires' disease should consult their healthcare provider.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, outbreaks are commonly associated with buildings or structures that have complex water systems, such as hotels and resorts, long-term care facilities, hospitals and cruise ships. The most likely sources of infection include water used for showering, hot tubs, decorative fountains, and cooling towers (parts of centralized air-conditioning systems for large buildings).

"We encourage high risk facilities to adopt water management plans to help prevent Legionnaires' disease," said Mark Valacak, director of the Genesee County Health Department. The CDC has a toolkit that can help building managers develop a water management plan that is available online at:

<https://www.cdc.gov/legionella/downloads/toolkit.pdf>

Proper maintenance and disinfection of hot water tanks, humidifiers, nebulizers, cooling towers, hot tubs, and decorative fountains are the most effective measures in preventing outbreaks. Cleaning, disinfecting, and maintenance should be done following manufacturer recommendation.

GCHD has worked closely with the local medical centers to provide information about *Legionella* bacteria and clinical guidance about Legionnaires' disease infections. A Legionnaires' disease fact sheet is posted on the GCHD website at www.gchd.us. GCHD continues to conduct surveillance for Legionnaires' disease cases.

Your Health. Our Work.

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