Legionella Factsheet

This factsheet has been created to provide up-to-date and accurate health information following a recent outbreak of Legionnaires’ disease.

What is Legionella and what illnesses can it cause?
Legionella is a bacteria (germ) found in the environment. It can cause two types of illness:
- Legionnaires’ disease, which is a pneumonia (lung infection) and can often be a severe illness
- Pontiac fever, which is a milder flu-like illness

Where is Legionella found?
Legionella bacteria is widely distributed in the environment and has previously been found in ponds and rivers. Problems arise when it contaminates man-made water systems, such as the water in air conditioning cooling systems, hot and cold water systems in buildings, spa pools, cooling towers and other artificial water systems.

Is it safe to visit the affected area and should I take any precautions?
We believe the risk to travellers to be low at present and there is no evidence to suggest that people should not travel into south west Edinburgh. The situation is being monitored and will be kept under constant review.

Are children at risk?
It should be noted that the illness is extremely rare in children and there are no cases in this current outbreak under the age of 30 years.

Further Questions?
Please contact the NHS 24 helpline on 08000 85 85 31 which is open from 8am – 10pm.
How do you get Legionnaires disease or Pontiac fever?
The commonest way to get these illnesses is through inhaling water droplets from a contaminated water system containing the bacteria. Legionella cannot be caught by drinking tap water, therefore there is no need for you to boil your water.

Could I pass this on to family or other contacts?
No. Legionella cannot spread from person to person.

Who is at risk?
For people who are healthy the risk is extremely low. However the risk is increased for:
• People over the age of 50 years
• Men more than women
• Individuals whose immune system is suppressed
• Patients with chronic lung disease
• Individuals who smoke.

What are the symptoms?
• ‘Flu-like’ illness
• Muscle aches
• Tiredness
• Headaches
• Dry cough
• High fever (39.5°C - 103°F)
• Sometimes diarrhoea and confusion may develop.

How soon do the symptoms occur?
The time between exposure to the bacteria and onset of symptoms (incubation period) is between 2 and 10 days, typically 5-6 days. In rare cases some people may develop symptoms as late as two weeks after exposure.

How is it diagnosed?
It is diagnosed either by testing a urine sample, a blood sample or a sample of saliva/sputum.

What is the treatment?
Treatment is with appropriate antibiotics, which will be prescribed by the doctor looking after you.