

# Frequently Asked Questions

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Indoor Air Quality

Denver Public Schools

## Legionella:

### Q: What is legionellosis?

A: Legionellosis is an infection caused by the bacterium *Legionella pneumophila*. The disease has two distinct forms:

- Legionnaires' disease, the more severe form of infection which includes pneumonia, and
- Pontiac fever, a milder illness.

Legionnaires' disease acquired its name in 1976 when an outbreak of pneumonia occurred among persons attending a convention of the American Legion in Philadelphia. Later, the bacterium causing the illness was named *Legionella*. Those with legionellosis are treated with antibiotics such as Erythromycin.

### Q: Where is the *Legionella* bacterium found?

A: *Legionella* organisms are naturally occurring and can be found in many water sources as well as in soil. However, the bacteria reproduce to high numbers in warm, stagnant water (90°-105°F), such as that found in certain plumbing systems and hot water tanks, cooling towers and evaporative condensers of large air-conditioning systems, and whirlpool spas.

### Q: How common is legionellosis in the United States?

A: An estimated 8,000 to 18,000 people get Legionnaires' disease in the United States each year. In Colorado, there are only 8 to 10 cases per year. Some people can be infected with the *Legionella* bacterium and have mild symptoms or no illness at all.

Outbreaks of Legionnaires' disease receive significant media attention. However, this disease usually occurs as a single, isolated case not associated with any recognized outbreak. When outbreaks do occur, they are usually recognized in the summer and early fall, but cases may occur year-round. About 5% to 30% of people who have Legionnaires' disease die.

### Q: What are the usual symptoms of legionellosis?

A: Patients with Legionnaires' disease usually have fever, chills, and a cough, which may be dry or may produce sputum. Some patients also have muscle aches, headache, tiredness, loss of appetite, and, occasionally, diarrhea. Laboratory tests may show that these patients' kidneys are not functioning properly. Chest X-rays often show pneumonia. It is difficult to distinguish Legionnaires' disease from other types of pneumonia by symptoms alone; other tests are required for diagnosis.

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## **Legionella (Continued):**

**Q: Who gets legionellosis?**

**A:** People of any age may get Legionnaires' disease, but the illness most often affects middle-aged and older persons, particularly those who smoke cigarettes or have chronic lung disease. Also at increased risk are persons whose immune system is suppressed by diseases such as cancer, kidney failure requiring dialysis, diabetes, or AIDS. Those that take drugs that suppress the immune system are also at higher risk.

**Q: How is legionellosis spread?**

**A:** Outbreaks of legionellosis have occurred after persons have breathed mists that come from a water source (e.g., air conditioning cooling towers, whirlpool spas, showers) contaminated with *Legionella* bacteria or from aspirating water that is contaminated. Persons may be exposed to these mists in homes, workplaces, hospitals, or public places. Legionellosis is not passed from person to person, and there is no evidence of persons becoming infected from auto air conditioners or household window air-conditioning units.

*Information from Centers for Disease Control*

[http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/legionellosis\\_t.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/legionellosis_t.htm)