

# Legionnaires' Disease

## Community and Public Health

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Legionnaires' disease is a form of pneumonia caused by a bacteria called *Legionella*. This is an environmental organism which lives in moist conditions.

Most cases of this disease have no common source association but outbreaks sometimes occur.

### What are the symptoms?

Legionnaires' disease often begins with:

- influenza-like symptoms
- fever
- muscle aches
- headache

Affected people can also develop a dry cough, abdominal pain and diarrhoea.

Symptoms begin 2 to 10 days (usually 3 to 5 days) after being infected. The effects of the illness may last for many weeks.

### How is it caught?

Legionnaires' disease is caught by inhaling airborne droplets contaminated by *Legionella* bacteria.

Airborne droplets may come from a variety of sources including:

- potting mix or compost
- cooling towers (air-conditioning or industrial uses)
- hot water systems (e.g. showers)
- spa pools, and
- decorative fountains.

### How is it treated?

This disease is treated with antibiotics. It is important to receive treatment early as a delay may result in a worse outcome.

### How is spread prevented?

To prevent Legionnaires' disease in commercial buildings, ventilation and water systems need to be maintained according to industry standards.

In the home situation, hot water cylinders maintained about 60°C may reduce the risk. A mixing valve may be needed to reduce the water temperature at the tap to prevent scalding if the cylinder water is at this temperature.

### To prevent Legionnaires' disease associated with gardening, the following precautions are recommended:

- water gardens gently using low pressure to avoid creating airborne droplets from the water hitting the ground,
- when potting plants reduce dust by wetting the soil/potting mix. Wet the potting mix in the bag before using it,
- open bags of composted products and potting mix slowly, outside and away from the face,
- avoid working in unventilated spaces,
- some authorities also advocate wearing a P2 mask and gloves as they afford greater protection and are particularly recommended for persons at increased risk,
- wash hands thoroughly after gardening and handling potting mix or compost and before allowing hands to touch the face (i.e. before removing mask, eating or drinking etc.)

If a person is considered to be at increased risk he/she should consider wearing a disposable respirator (not a nuisance dust mask).

### Who is at risk?

Persons who develop the illness are usually over 50 years of age, smoke, or have other risk factors such as a chronic illness or suppressed immunity.

Men are twice as likely as women to get the disease. It does not spread from person-to-person.

Information adapted from the Ministry of Health (New Zealand).