

Water hygiene



What is Legionnaires' disease?

Legionnaires' disease is potentially fatal and is caused by legionella bacteria. Infection is caused by breathing in small droplets of water contaminated by the bacteria. The disease cannot be passed from one person to another.

Everyone is potentially at risk of infection but some people are at higher risk – e.g. those over 45 years of age, smokers and heavy drinkers, those suffering from chronic respiratory or kidney disease and people whose immune system is impaired.

Where are legionella bacteria found?

Legionella bacteria are common in natural water courses such as rivers and ponds. Since the bacteria are widespread in the environment, they may contaminate and grow in other water systems such as hot and cold water services. They are killed by high temperatures.

How do people get it?

The agent that causes Legionnaires' disease is a bacterium called Legionella pneumophila. People catch Legionnaires' disease by inhaling small droplets of water suspended in the air, which contain the bacteria.

Certain conditions increase the risk from legionella:

- A suitable water temperature for growth, 20-45°C;
- A source of nutrients for the organism, e.g. sludge, scale, rust, algae, and other organic matter
- A way of creating and spreading breathable droplets, e.g. the aerosol created by a tap, showerhead or toilet.

However, remember that most people exposed to legionella do not become ill.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of legionnaires' disease are similar to the symptoms of the flu:

- high temperature, feverishness and chills
- cough
- muscle pains
- headache, leading to pneumonia. Very occasionally diarrhoea and signs of mental confusion



How is it treated?

The illness is treated with an antibiotic called erythromycin (this must be prescribed by your doctor / hospital).

What to do if you think you have contracted Legionnaires disease?

If you develop the above symptoms and you are worried that it might be legionnaires' disease, see your doctor. If you are diagnosed with legionnaires' disease please make your local Housing Office aware.

Because it is similar to the flu, it is not always easy to diagnose. A blood or urine test is needed to determine whether an illness is, or is not, legionnaires' disease.

What can I do to reduce the risk of Legionella?

We recommend you run all your taps and your shower for a couple of minutes each week to prevent the build up of harmful bacteria. We also recommend you clean your shower head every month to prevent the build up limescale.

How do I clean shower heads?

Remove your shower head from the wall. Fill a bowl with neat vinegar and let the shower head soak in it for a few hours. Leave overnight if it's especially badly scaled. Then scrub the holes with a toothbrush. If the holes are still clogged or green, use a toothpick or pin to clean them out. Rinse well and put the shower head back where it belongs.

Gold or brass finished shower heads are coated to protect them from oxidation. If you use anything abrasive, you can ruin the finish on your fixture. Do not let your fixture soak for more than 30 minutes at a time. If you soak the shower head any longer, the finish on your fixture could be damaged.

How do I flush my water system?

Legionella may be present in your water system if you have been away from your home for a significant period of time. Legionella if breathed in through the inhalation of water vapour can be harmful and lead to legionnaire's disease that can be fatal.

Before using your water supply please do the following to make sure you're safe:

- **All taps** – Place a tea towel over the tap and run water through the tap for two minutes. The tea towel will protect you from breathing in water droplets splashing back from the sink. Repeat this for all hot and cold taps.
- **Showers** – Place a plastic bag over the shower head and secure it using something like an elastic band. Cut a small hole in the corner of the bag for water to escape and run the shower for two minutes. The plastic bag will prevent any spray and protect you.
- **Toilets** – Put the toilet lid down and flush the toilet. Always flush the toilet with the lid in the down position. The toilet lid will protect you from the spray.

This will result in fresh water being in your water system and it being safe for you to use.