

Legionellosis

Legionellosis is an infection caused by a bacteria belonging to a species called *Legionella*. The affected person normally develops pneumonia.

Legionellosis is commonly called 'Legionnaires' disease' a name coined in 1976 after a respiratory infection developed in many delegates to a convention in Philadelphia held by the American Legion of Pennsylvania.

The bacteria are found in aquatic environments and artificial water systems such as potable water distribution system, cooling towers, evaporative condensers, respiratory therapy equipment, and whirlpools. Poor maintenance of these water systems is a major cause of the spread of *Legionella*.

People are infected by inhaling water droplets containing the bacteria. Some show no symptoms at all after inhaling the bacterium. Others may develop Pontiac fever, an influenza-like illness that lasts for two to five days. But most come down with pneumonia which is more serious.

Men, smokers, and patients with underlying illnesses are more vulnerable to pneumonia. The symptoms include feeling generally unwell, cough, fever, chest pain, diarrhoea, headache, sometimes even suffering confusion and delirium. In severe cases, sufferers may develop respiratory failure, or even die. Legionellosis can be treated with antibiotics.

Proper and periodic maintenance of water systems is important to preventing *Legionella* from gathering and multiplying in these systems. Quitting smoking is also essential because smokers have a higher risk of getting infected.

Although the number of legionellosis cases in Hong Kong has increased in the past five years, the rise may not reflect the true picture. This is because more effective diagnoses, such as urine antigen detection tests, are being carried out nowadays, enabling doctors to spot many more cases than before.