

One strain of bacterium called *Legionella pneumophila* has been responsible for illnesses linked to air conditioning systems in buildings.

Another strain called *Legionella longbeachae*, which occurs in soils, composts and potting mixes, has recently been found to cause illness in some people.

Are some people more at risk than others?

People who are susceptible to lung diseases or chest conditions are more prone to *Legionella* infections. These include the middleaged and elderly, the sick, cigarette smokers and alcoholics.

It's important for the illness to be diagnosed and treated promptly in such cases because of the possibility that complications may develop.

If you come into one of these categories, you should make sure you take the precautions given here.

How is legionellosis treated?

Usually patients are put on a course of antibiotics. The illness responds readily to treatment.

Can you become immune to it?

Yes, if exposed to *Legionella* you can contract a mild form of the disease without realising it and your body builds up antibodies which give immunity to future infection. This immunity is specific to the particular strain of *Legionella* to which you were exposed – you could be immune to one strain of *Legionella* and not another.

What should I do if I think I'm affected?

You should see your medical practitioner immediately. Your doctor may arrange for you to have blood serum or sputum tests.

Your doctor can give you further information and advice about legionellosis.



L EGIONELLOSIS

What you should know if you work with soils, compost and potting mix.



INTRODUCTION

If your work involves handling garden soils, compost and potting mixes, you need to be aware of the possible risk of contracting legionellosis (also known as Legionnaires Disease or Pontiac Fever). This pamphlet describes the health precautions you should take and answers some questions you may have.

QUESTIONS ABOUT LEGIONELLOSIS

Just what is legionellosis?

It's a chest condition with symptoms similar to pneumonia. It develops in severity from a mild flu-

like illness to a more severe respiratory condition. Common early symptoms include loss of appetite, muscle pains, headache, abdominal pains and diarrhoea, with fever and a dry cough developing as the disease progresses. The incubation period for the development of pneumonia is from two to ten days.

What causes this type of illness?

Legionellosis is caused by a bacterium that occurs naturally in the environment. About thirty different strains of the *Legionella* bacterium are known. It is suspected that a person contracts the illness by breathing in dust or water vapour containing the bacterium.

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HEALTH AND SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

To avoid the risk of contracting legionellosis, here are the precautions you should take:

- Water gardens and composts gently, using a low-pressure hose.
- When opening bags of composted potting mix, do so slowly, making sure the opening is directed away from your face.
- When potting plants, wet the soil to reduce dust.
- Avoid doing this work in unventilated places such as enclosed greenhouses.
- Wash your hands carefully after handling soils.

If these precautions aren't practicable, you should consider wearing a disposable respirator (not a nuisance dust mask). The double-strap type gives good protection.

Employers are responsible for providing respiratory protection and for training staff in its correct fitting and use.

