

# HSE HPSC cautions to be aware and prepare to prevent Legionnaires' Disease

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The HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has urged people to be aware of Legionnaires' Disease, a type of pneumonia which causes serious illness in people aged over 50 years, smokers, and those with underlying health conditions. Legionnaires' Disease and the milder form, Pontiac fever, a flu-like illness, are caused by the growth of Legionella bacteria in water systems which are not adequately managed.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many buildings have been closed, or their use restricted. This can increase the risk of Legionella growth in the water systems and associated equipment including evaporative air conditioning systems, water fountains, showers, spa pools, and other equipment if the water systems have not been managed adequately.

The illness is acquired by the inhalation of aerosolised water contaminated with Legionella bacteria. The case fatality rate (rate of deaths associated with Legionnaires' disease) is about 10%. The incubation period for Legionnaires' Disease is usually about 2-10 days with symptoms appearing 5-6 days after infection but may take longer. The illness usually starts with flu-like symptoms including fever, tiredness, headache, and muscle pains. This is followed by a dry cough and breathing difficulties that may progress to a severe pneumonia.

It is very important that during this pandemic and in particular, before reopening occurs that all water systems are kept safe for the future health and safety of guests, visitors and staff. The European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases (ESGLI) has produced step by step guidance for managing Legionella in building water systems during the COVID-19 Pandemic which are available at the HPSC website.

The guidance is aimed at hotels, campsites, cruise ships etc. but is relevant to all public, residential and office buildings with similar water systems.

- The Pool Water Treatment Advisory Group (PWTAG) has produced guidance in relation to the reopening of swimming pools during the COVID-19 pandemic
- The ESGLI has published guidance for managing Legionella in nursing and care home water systems and managing Legionella in dental practices during the Covid-19 pandemic
- Information and advice is also available from the Health and Safety Authority (HSA).

For more information on Legionella infection and guidance in relation to the prevention of Legionella infection please see the HPSC website.