

What is Legionella?

This leaflet has been provided to inform you about the risks of contracting Legionnaires' disease, and how to significantly reduce this risk.



What is Legionella?

Legionella is a type of bacteria found naturally in freshwater environments.

It can become a health concern when it grows and spreads in human-made water systems like showerheads, taps, hot water tanks and heaters. Legionnaires' disease is a potentially fatal form of pneumonia, which can affect anybody. **It is caused by the inhalation of small droplets of water from contaminated sources containing legionella bacteria such as the spray of a shower or spray taps. You cannot get Legionnaires' disease from drinking water.**



In domestic properties the risk of Legionnaires' disease is rated as low risk. This can be kept low by following the guidelines in this leaflet.



Where is Legionella found?

All hot and cold water systems in residential properties are a potential source for legionella bacteria growth.

The main areas of risk are where the bacteria can multiply and increase to dangerous levels and then spread, e.g. in spray from showers and taps.



Am I at risk of catching Legionnaires' Disease?

Thankfully, catching Legionnaires' disease in your home is rare. It is also not infectious, so it can't be passed from person to person.

However, there is a possibility that when certain conditions exist in the home it increases your risk. Water that is between 20 - 45°C (lukewarm to hot) is a suitable breeding ground for bacteria to grow. This can happen in large water tanks in lofts that are not used much, or pipes that go to a tap that is hardly ever turned on.

Everyone is potentially susceptible to infection but Legionnaires' disease most commonly affects people over the age of 45, smokers and heavy drinkers, those suffering from chronic respiratory or kidney disease, people whose immune system is impaired, and those suffering from long term illness.

Not everyone exposed to legionella bacteria becomes ill. On average, there are approximately 500 reported cases of Legionnaires' disease a year. The symptoms of Legionnaires' disease are similar to those of flu, eg high temperatures, fevers or chills, headaches, tiredness, muscle pains or a dry cough.

Legionnaires' disease is easily preventable by putting in place some simple control measures. The following information will help you prevent any potential problems.

What can I do to minimise the risk?

The likelihood of Legionella being in your home is very low as most households do not store huge amounts of water and water is used regularly so it's not usually standing still in pipes.

Following these simple precautions will help keep you safe.

- If you move into a new home or your home has been lying empty for at least a week, then you should flush out your water systems by running the water in all showers, baths, wash basins, sinks and taps continuously for at least 5-10 minutes. You must do both hot and cold taps.
- When turning taps on, turn them on slowly so that you don't splash water, as this might release water droplets into the air.
- Flush toilets with the lid down following a period of non-use.
- When flushing showers, remove the shower head and lower the hose into the bath. If you're unable to remove the head, wrap it in a towel or facecloth to make sure there is no spray that you could inhale. Legionella can grow and multiply on grime, scale, algae and rust so disinfect all shower heads and taps regularly to ensure they are clean and free from a build-up of lime scale, mould or algae growth. Report any deposits such as rust or any unusual matter flowing from your water outlets to us.
- Set your hot water tank temperature to 60°C (this does not apply to combi boiler systems that provide instant hot water) as this is too hot for bacteria to survive.



0°C
Bacterium
dormant



20°C - 45°C
Legionella
will multiply



45°C - 60°C
Legionella
will survive
but cannot
multiply



60°C +
Legionella will
not survive



What does RSHA do to minimise the risk?

In some cases, such as shared accommodation, we employ a water hygiene company to assess communal water systems. Where necessary, and in line with legal obligations, we will regularly monitor and inspect these homes to make sure water systems are clean and the water is safe to use.

We do not monitor water hygiene within your home, so please follow the advice in this leaflet.

What do I do if I think I may have contracted Legionnaires' disease?

If you suspect that you or someone in your home has contracted Legionnaires' disease, contact your doctor immediately. You should also contact us so that we can take the appropriate measures.



To find out more information about Legionella, please go to the Health and Safety Executive website at www.hse.gov.uk/legionnaires.

If you would like us translate this leaflet or provide a Braille version please contact RSHA

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