

THE EDUCATOR



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PREVENTIVE STEPS THAT CAN HELP SAVE LIVES:

- Test the water
- Maintain water sources diligently
- Discourage smoking

Protect your school from legionella bacteria with three best practices

In the summer of 2015, Legionnaires' disease, a serious respiratory illness, struck in the Bronx, New York taking the lives of 13 people and sickening more than 100 others.

The tragic incident was instructive in preventing what may otherwise have been two subsequent tragedies.

In September of 2015, legionella bacteria in higher than normal levels were discovered in the cooling towers of three Illinois suburban schools, leading to evacuations. Then, in October of 2015, legionella bacteria were found in at least seven cooling towers of several Long Island schools.

The response was quick and included the draining and cleaning of the cooling towers – preventing new outbreaks and possible deaths.

It begins in the plumbing. Legionella grows best in warm water such as in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, plumbing systems and fountains.

It took its name from the first known epidemic of the disease, which began at the 1976 state convention for the American Legion in a hotel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. During that incident, 182 became infected and 29 died, all because of an infected water cooling tower in the hotel's HVAC system.

A severe form of pneumonia. The disease is predominantly airborne: Transmission occurs when a victim breathes in mist or vapor containing the bacteria. (It's also possible to become infected by choking when drinking tainted water.) The bacteria infect the lungs and cause pneumonia.

Most people suffering from Legionnaires' disease will require hospitalization, and in extreme cases, the disease will result in lung failure or death. According to the CDC, about one in every 10 people infected with the disease dies.

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WHAT CAN YOUR SCHOOL DO TO REDUCE THE CHANCES OF A LEGIONELLA OUTBREAK?

Legionella are naturally occurring, which means even a water fountain can contain some level of the bacteria. So how do you determine how much is too much? That takes expertise – to monitor potential sources, interpret the results and determine if subsequent action is needed.

Here are three recommended preventive steps:

1. **Test the water.** Routinely test for legionella and follow a consistent procedure for responding to higher than normal levels, including both evacuation and remediation protocols.
2. **Maintain water sources diligently.** Regularly monitor, clean and maintain cooling towers, water tanks, plumbing systems, fountains and other possible water sources on a scheduled basis.
3. **Discourage smoking.** According to the Mayo Clinic, smoking increases the chance of infection, so consider limiting or prohibiting smoking on school property.

All of the above best practices can help prevent a Legionnaires' outbreak in your school by detecting and eliminating potentially dangerous levels of legionella, limiting exposure and promoting lung health. At the same time, they can help prevent interruption to operations at your school as the result of an outbreak.

It makes good sense to put them in place every school year.

Prepare. Protect. Prevail.®

Sources:

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