Newsletter Article IPC Topic: Legionella

Title: How can Legionella and wet surfaces make us sick?

Recognizing where germs live and how they can spread can help you choose the right infection control actions to protect everyone. Many germs grow in water. Some germs that live in water are Legionella, Acinetobacter, Serratia, Pseudomonas.[9] Most of the time, the germs in tap water aren't a problem for healthy people, but they can cause illness in patients with very weak immune systems.[9]

People at increased risk of getting sick are: persons 50 years or older, current or former smokers, persons with a chronic lung disease (like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease or emphysema), persons with weak immune systems or who take drugs that weaken the immune system (like after a transplant operation or chemotherapy, individuals with cancer or with underlying illnesses such as diabetes, kidney failure, or liver failure.[2]

Let's go over how Legionella can make people sick. Legionella is found naturally in freshwater environments, it can become a health concern in human-made water systems (e.g., plumbing system of large buildings, cooling towers, certain medical devices, decorative fountains, hot tubs) where conditions allow it to multiply.[2] People contract Legionella by inhaling aerosolized water droplets containing the bacteria, or, less commonly, by aspiration of contaminated drinking water. Legionella is usually not transmitted from person to person.[2]

An important step of stopping the spread of Legionella is prevention. One key factor in preventing Legionella growth is the maintenance of water systems.[8,9] Other prevention methods are as simple as being aware of pooling water, at-risk population, and healthcare devices that could house legionella if not properly maintained. Medical devices that could house legionella include, CPAP machines, humidifiers, ice machines, and bronchoscopes.

You may be asking yourself what actions you can take to stop legionella growth? Let's go over how simple infection control steps can help stop the spread of legionella. Routinely clean ice machines and have a policy for filter changing.[8,9] Showers and tub rooms should be routinely cleaned and disinfected per policy after each patient use. Tub jets should be disinfected per policy and healthcare workers should be knowledgeable on disinfection and cleaning of unit per manufactures guidelines. If patients want to use humidifiers in rooms, clean daily and only use distilled water.[8,9] Monitor and report if any patients/residents have cough, fever, or pneumonia-type symptoms.

To wrap up, healthcare workers can prevent Legionella by identifying the legionella hazards in the workplace. Are you interested in sharing infection prevention tips with your staff? Our Project Firstline team has quick and simple training resources available on

Legionella as well as other IPC training topics. Contact us at dohpfl@nd.gov to get training resources you can use today!

For more information on recognizing risk for Legionella and related Project Firstline materials, see References below:

1. Legionnaires Disease, Pontiac Fever Fast Facts | CDC
2. Legionnaires Disease Cause and Spread | CDC
3. 2016-06-vitalsigns.pdf (cdc.gov)
4. What Clinicians Need to Know about Legionnaires' Disease. (cdc.gov)
5. Water Management in Healthcare Facilities for Legionella | CDC
6. Legionella Toolkit-Version 1.1-June 24, 2021 (cdc.gov)
7. Print Materials and Job Aids from Project Firstline | Infection Control | CDC
8. Toolkit for Controlling Legionella in Common Sources of Exposure (Legionella Control Toolkit) (cdc.gov)
9. Preventing Occupational Exposure to Legionella (cdc.gov)
10. Germs live in water and on wet surfaces (cdc.gov)