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LEGIONELLOSIS, POTTING SOIL - NEW ZEALAND 2003  
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Date: Wed, 30 Dec 2003  
From: Denis Green <snoigel@hotmail.com>  
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Gardeners warned of Legionnaires' disease

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Gardeners are being urged to take care when using potting mix this summer after an increase in cases of Legionnaires' disease.

Medical officer of health Margot McLean said there had been 13 cases of legionellosis (Legionnaires disease) in the wider Wellington region in 2003, compared with 9 in 2002. 5 of those cases were in the past 2 months [November-December 2003].

4 of the recent cases of the disease, which could cause anything from mild flu-like symptoms to severe pneumonia, were likely to have been caused by a specific strain of the disease usually found in potting mix [*L. longbeachae* - Mod.LL], Dr McLean said.

The disease was often associated with air-conditioning systems, because legionella bacteria, which cause the disease, can live in the system cooling towers. However, the bacteria were also widespread in water, soil, potting mix, and compost.

Dr McLean warned gardeners to take the following precautions to minimise the risk from potting mix and compost:

- - Open the bag away from your face.
- - Make sure when gardening inside that areas such as potting sheds and glasshouses are well ventilated.
- - Moisten the contents of potting mix in the bag before using it to avoid creating dust.
- - Wash hands thoroughly after handling potting mix or soil, even if gloves have been worn. People should see their doctor if they develop a fever, muscle aches, headache, cough, or diarrhea.

Antibiotics are effective in early treatment of the disease, which has an incubation period of 2 to 10 days, and most commonly affects smokers, those over 50, and people with lowered immunity, Dr McLean said.

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