

[Back to article](#)



UF hospital will treat water after bacteria detected

Legionella bacteria, associated with Legionnaire's disease, was discovered in a patient room on Tuesday.

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University of Florida College of Medicine and Shands officials have moved to treat the water system at the new Shands Cancer Hospital after Legionella bacteria was found in a patient room Tuesday.

The bacteria, associated with a type of pneumonia called Legionnaire's disease, is commonly found in warm water.

When one patient tested positive for the bacteria, water samples were taken from the two sinks in the patient's room and more Legionella was discovered.

"At this time, we have not identified any other cases," said Dr. Timothy Flynn, UF interim senior associate dean for clinical affairs.

Shands CEO Tim Goldfarb said steps already have been taken to determine the source of the bacteria and treat the hospital's water system.

The cancer hospital is served by an on-site GRU facility that provides 100 percent of the hospital's energy needs. Cited for its energy efficiency, the GRU facility captures hot exhaust from its turbine, converting it to steam that is then used to run the hospital's heating and cooling system.

"The system was thoroughly tested before the opening of the hospital," Flynn said. "Our engineers are looking at the system, and we will continue to monitor the water sources for a period of time. We are very early into the process of looking into this."

Shands UF, across Archer Road from the cancer hospital, is on a separate water

system and is not affected.

Additional water samples are being tested, Flynn said, but rather than wait on the results, the hospital's water is being heated and chlorinated at high levels. The treatment should be complete this afternoon or evening.

In the meantime, patients and their families are asked not to drink the hospital water due to the high chlorine levels, not to use the ice machines, not to shower due to the high water temperature and to continue to wash their hands thoroughly with cold water.

Bottled water will be available and high-risk patients are being screened for Legionella.

About 140 patients are hospitalized at the Shands Cancer Hospital. Not all are cancer patients. No further information was provided Wednesday on the patient who tested positive for Legionella.

Each year in the United States, between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionnaire's disease. Symptoms usually appear between two and 12 days after exposure. It is not spread by personal contact, or by drinking contaminated water.

It is most often contracted by breathing in the bacteria in water vapor.

Those most at risk from the bacteria are those over the age of 65, smokers, or those with a chronic lung disease. Those with a weakened immune system, due to cancer, diabetes or kidney failure, also are more likely to be sickened by Legionella.

Most cases can be treated with antibiotics, but 5 to 30 percent of the cases prove fatal.

Legionella bacteria grow best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, or parts of air-conditioning systems in large buildings.

Goldfarb said hospital administrators did not want to alarm the community, but at the same time, wanted to make certain that no other patients were involved.

"What we have is hardly an outbreak, let alone an epidemic," Flynn said.

"We want to be transparent with patients and their families, make sure there are no other patients involved, but not cause unnecessary alarm," Goldfarb said.

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