

Saint Agnes has Legionnaires' case Hospital confirms disease in 1 patient.

By Tracy Correa / The Fresno Bee

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A patient at Saint Agnes Medical Center has contracted Legionnaires' disease through the hospital's water supply, officials said Wednesday.

The disease, a severe form of pneumonia, is caused by the bacteria Legionella. It was found in a water sample from the hospital's west wing, where the 26-year-old man was being treated.

Saint Agnes officials said they've taken the necessary steps to address the problem, including flushing the hospital's water system with superheated water to kill the bacteria. The treatment, with 180-degree temperature water, began Monday in the unit where the patient was hospitalized and was expected to continue throughout the hospital Wednesday.

Stacy Vaillancourt, vice president of marketing, communications and advocacy at Saint Agnes, said the bacteria was confirmed Monday by a lab in Georgia. The hospital also sent water samples from other parts of the hospital to be tested. Results are pending, but the hospital decided to flush the water throughout the hospital as a precaution.

Vaillancourt said the hospital has taken every measure to ensure the safety of patients and employees and will be installing a chlorine dioxide filter system by Friday.

Fresno County health officials said only a handful of cases of Legionnaires' disease are reported every year.

Legionnaires' is a type of pneumonia that affects between 8,000 and 18,000 people in the United States -- and about a quarter of those are contracted at hospitals, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Hospital officials believe the case is isolated.

"There is just this one case, this one individual," Vaillancourt said.

The infected patient had a compromised immune system, making him more susceptible to getting sick from the common, environmental bacteria often found in water sources, Vaillancourt said.

The man was originally admitted to the hospital Sept. 15, for cellulitis -- a bacterial skin infection. During his stay, he complained of other symptoms and additional tests were ordered. A urine test later confirmed the presence of Legionella in his system.

Because Saint Agnes gets its water from the city, the city's water division was notified.

Rene Ramirez, director of Fresno's public utilities, said the county health department called him Wednesday to test water for Legionella, something the city does not typically do. However, late Wednesday, he said the county told him testing wasn't necessary and that state officials would be focusing on the hospital.

The California Department of Public Health is investigating the Legionnaires' case after being notified by the hospital.

Ken August, a spokesman for the state health department, would only say, "We have an open investigation at Saint Agnes." He said he couldn't confirm what it involved.

Local and federal health experts said there is very little danger to the public, even if they are exposed to the bacteria.

Fresno County health officer Dr. Edward Moreno, who was first notified Oct. 9 about the case, said the public is at very little risk of contracting the disease.

"People who are most susceptible are those with compromised immune systems and are hospitalized," he said.

The disease got its name after the first recognized outbreak in 1976 when people attending a

MORE INFORMATION

Legionnaires' disease

Numbers: 8,000 to 18,000 patients are hospitalized with the disease each year in the U.S. However, many more cases go undiagnosed and unreported.

Symptoms: High fever, chills, cough and sometimes muscle aches and headaches -- appearing two to 14 days after infection.

Diagnosis: Chest X-rays. Tests on blood, urine, phlegm.

Treatment/Prognosis: Most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics. Healthy people usually recover. However, it can be very serious and cause death in 5% to 30% of cases.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Philadelphia convention of the American Legion fell ill from the then-unidentified pneumonia. Some 220 people were given medical treatment, and about 30 people died.

The Legionella bacteria is usually inhaled through water mist rather than swallowed. Most people are resistant, but it can be fatal when contracted by older people or people with weakened immune systems. There is no evidence it can be spread by person-to-person contact.

Lauri Hicks, a medical epidemiologist with the CDC in Atlanta who specializes in the disease, said Legionnaires' is difficult to contract.

"Legionella is very, very common in our environment. It lives in fresh water. I suspect most of us have been exposed to Legionella at some point," Hicks said. "It only affects a small number of people. Typically, you don't see large outbreaks."

She estimated about 25% of reported cases each year are traced to hospitals. "One thing that makes hospitals and large buildings prone to colonization of Legionella is they contain very complicated plumbing systems," she said.

Hicks said it is not unusual for the bacteria to be isolated to just one area of a large hospital or hotel, she said.

The reporter can be reached at tcorrae@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6378.



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