

Dublin office workers contract Legionnaires' disease

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Two staff members of insurance firm Allianz have been diagnosed with the potentially fatal Legionnaires' disease, after contracting it through the insurer's air conditioning system.

Legionnaires' disease is a type of pneumonia, which can be very serious and signs of the disease can include a high fever, chills, and a cough.

In Ireland the disease is quite rare, with 16 cases reported in 2007. It causes death in about 7.5 per cent of cases, but most cases can be treated successfully with antibiotics.

Allianz believes that a cooling tower, used as part of the company's air conditioning system at its Dublin headquarters in Elm Park, Dublin 4, may be the source of the outbreak, as it was found to have high levels of the Legionella bacterium.

This bacterium tends to grow in warm water and the disease is contracted by breathing in vapour that has been contaminated. The disease is not spread through personal contact and most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill.

In a statement, Allianz said that it was confident that it had, "taken all steps necessary to guarantee that any further risk of infection has been neutralised". The firm intends to continue to monitor the situation and will keep its employees informed of any further developments.

The Health Services Executive (HSE) has investigated the outbreak, and is "fully satisfied that Allianz has taken all necessary steps to address this outbreak of Legionnaires' disease at its offices through both its testing and reporting procedures".

The HSE first became aware of the problem on June 27th, when one Allianz staff was admitted to hospital. In association with the company, the HSE then put in place standard procedures to identify the source, and following an investigation of the insurer's air conditioning system, Allianz shut down its cooling towers and completed emergency cleaning and disinfection procedures on July 2nd.

The HSE then distributed relevant information on the disease to the company's staff and any member of staff showing any symptoms was advised to contact their GP immediately. As a result, a number of staff members are now being tested for the disease, and this procedure led to the confirmation of the second case.

All employees at Allianz have been informed of the outbreak and have been advised to contact Allianz HR should they have any concerns or worries.

According to statistics provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, the rate of Legionnaires' disease is much lower in Ireland than the European average, occurring in approximately 3.8 people out of every million in Ireland, compared to 11.2 cases per million of population in Europe.

From 2000-2007, 67 cases were reported in Ireland and there were five deaths. The median age of those affected was 48 years, with a range from 18 to 80 years.

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