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NSW sees rise in Legionnaires' disease

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A Sydney woman has died from Legionnaires' disease, prompting warnings from NSW Health, which has reported a jump in the number of people with the potentially fatal condition.

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Twenty-four cases, including one death, were reported in March and April this year, compared to eight during the same period in 2010, NSW Health said on Monday.

"This year, we are seeing something that is much higher than we would normally expect," said Dr Jeremy McAnulty, NSW Health's director of health protection.

In early April, a woman in her 90s died from the disease in Western Sydney, the department confirmed.

Legionnaires' disease is a form of pneumonia caused by bacteria which contaminate air-conditioning towers, spas, shower heads and other bodies of water.

Last June, the illness claimed the life of a 66-year-old Melbourne man, who died after being infected in a cluster of three cases.

The disease was found in two contaminated cooling towers on top of low-rise office buildings in Doncaster, in Melbourne's east.

The two other affected men recovered.

Dr McAnulty said cases tended to increase at this time of year when air-conditioning systems are being adjusted and turned on and off.

Passers-by are most at risk from contaminated vapours, which drift in the wind, making it difficult to locate the source.

"It becomes a detective game," Dr McAnulty said.

"We have to interview the person, map locations, look at the records of cooling towers. And sometimes it can be other sources of water vapour that might be the source of infection."

Investigations into the 24 recent cases, from across the Sydney region, have not uncovered a common source of contamination, Dr McAnulty said.

He urged businesses to help prevent an outbreak by checking and cleaning their cooling systems.

Legionnaires' disease usually causes fever, chills, a cough and shortness of breath, with some people experiencing tiredness, muscle aches, headache, loss of appetite and diarrhoea.

The disease is treatable, only occasionally causing death.

This story was found at: <http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/nsw-sees-rise-in-legionnaires-disease-20110509-1efh9.html>