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Onondaga County Legionellosis Outbreak Frequently Asked Questions

- **What is legionellosis or Legionnaires' disease?**

Legionellosis can be a mild respiratory illness or it can be severe enough to cause death. The early symptoms of legionellosis may be flu-like with muscle aches, headache, fatigue, and dry cough followed by high fever, chills and occasionally diarrhea. Temperatures commonly reach 102-105 degrees Fahrenheit and chest X-rays often show pneumonia. People of any age can get legionellosis, but the disease most often affects those who are elderly. People with underlying illnesses such as cancer, those with lowered immune system resistance to disease, or those who smoke are also at higher risk. It rarely occurs in otherwise healthy people.
- **How is *Legionella* spread?**

Legionella appears to be spread through the air from a soil or water source. All studies to date have shown that person-to-person spread does not occur.
- **What is happening in Onondaga County?**

Since June 30, there have been ten confirmed cases of legionellosis in the Onondaga Hill area, including the Community General Hospital (CGH) Campus. Onondaga County Health Department (OCHD) and the New York State Department of Health (NYSDOH) are working to determine possible sources of infection.
- **What are the health department(s) doing to investigate the possible sources of infection?**

NYSDOH epidemiologic and environmental health staff have made several site visits to the campus to:

 - Enhance the search for additional cases.
 - Health advisory was distributed to hospitals and providers in Onondaga County and the Central NY Region.
 - Request physicians to test persons with pneumonia for legionellosis.
 - Provide laboratory testing recommendations.
 - Remind providers and laboratories to report any suspected and confirmed cases to the local health department.
 - OCHD issued a press release to recommend that persons who have symptoms of Legionnaires' disease to seek medical attention.
 - Interview persons with Legionnaires' disease to determine where they have had exposure to water aerosols (e.g., Jacuzzi, fountains, misters) and their activities in the community.

- Perform an environmental assessment of aerosol exposures in common to the cases.
- For systems of concern, collect water samples for testing at NYSDOH Wadsworth Center.

- **I have heard that there was *Legionella* in the CGH cooling tower. What does that mean?**

As part of the outbreak investigation, samples collected from a CGH cooling tower were tested at the NYSDOH Wadsworth Center Laboratory. One of the samples grew *Legionella pneumophila*, the causative agent of legionellosis. Since the sample was collected, the cooling tower has been disinfected. Additional samples have been collected and sent to NYSDOH for testing to confirm the effectiveness of the disinfection. We do not have any reason to believe that operation of the tower poses a risk of illness, but continue to monitor the situation.

- **Should I cancel my plans to visit the Onondaga Hill area or my appointment on the Community General Hospital campus?**

No. Cases have reported exposure to the area in mid-to-late June. We have no information to suggest the exposure is ongoing. As part of our investigation, we are performing environmental assessments of common exposures among the cases and providing prevention and control recommendations as necessary. We continue to closely monitor the situation.