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City of Milwaukee Health Department Legionella Investigation Update
Additional suspect cases reported, health officials continue to investigate potential environmental sources of exposure

MILWAUKEE – The City of Milwaukee Health Department (MHD) continues to investigate cases of Legionnaires’ disease as the number of city residents diagnosed with the illness has increased to 26 confirmed or suspect cases reported in the city since June 1 of this year, and 40 confirmed or suspect cases in Milwaukee County. In 2012, 20 confirmed cases were reported in the City of Milwaukee.

“The City of Milwaukee Health Department continues to investigate all new case reports,” said Commissioner of Health Bevan K. Baker. “Confirmed cases of Legionnaires’ disease typically increase during late summer and early fall, and we will continue to closely monitor trends in this illness within the community.”

Legionnaires’ disease often results in a severe pneumonia caused by Legionella, a bacterium found naturally in soil and water environments. It is usually acquired after inhaling mist or aerosolized droplets from a contaminated water source. It cannot be spread person to person. Antibiotic treatment is available and effective for those with confirmed cases. Those most susceptible are individuals who smoke heavily, have chronic lung disease, or have other underlying medical conditions. Of the current cases, a majority have reported underlying medical conditions or related risk factors.

Previous outbreaks of Legionella have been linked to contaminated cooling towers, hot water tanks, decorative fountains, and hot tubs. The MHD investigation has included taking samples from possible community sources. At this time, all samples have returned negative results.

“In many outbreaks of Legionnaires’ disease, a single source is not identified,” said Paul Biedrzycki, Director of Disease Control and Environmental Health. “Our investigation continues to point to the possibility of multiple sources being involved in the city of Milwaukee and perhaps the region.”

The MHD has conducted outreach to local businesses and building owners regarding proper cooling tower maintenance. The MHD will also continue surveillance for new cases in coordination with state health officials and other local jurisdictions. Area health care providers are asked to continue to test and report suspect cases of atypical pneumonia to local public health departments for follow-up.

Further information regarding Legionella and proper maintenance of building water systems can be found at www.milwaukee.gov/health.

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