

Seven die from Legionnaires' disease at Illinois veterans home

September 2 2015, by Alan Scher Zagier

The death toll from a Legionnaires' disease outbreak at a western Illinois veterans home has climbed to seven, and the state's public health director has warned that more fatalities could occur.

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs and the state Department of Public Health said Tuesday that the residents of the facility in Quincy who contracted Legionnaire's—a severe form of pneumonia—had underlying medical conditions and an average age of 86.

Thirty-nine residents have been sickened so far and test results for others are pending. The outbreak was first identified late last week; its source remains undetermined.

Those who exhibit symptoms such as breathing difficulties, coughing, fever and muscle aches are monitored closely, and infected patients are treated with antibiotics, said Ryan Yantis, a Department of Veterans Affairs spokesman.

"We are going with an abundance of caution," Yantis said.

"Unfortunately, all of these symptoms match normal, run-of-the-mill respiratory illnesses."

An epidemiological team from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta visited the 129-year-old facility on Monday to assist the state investigation. CDC officials referred inquiries to their Illinois counterparts.

"Unfortunately, we expect to see additional cases and possibly additional deaths because the incubation period for Legionnaires' disease can be up to two weeks," said Dr. Nirav Shah, Illinois' [public health](#) director.

Legionnaires' disease is mostly contracted through inhaling bacteria that thrives in warm water. People can get sick if they inhale mist or vapor from contaminated water systems.

Residents are relying on bottled water and sponge baths as a precaution. The facility has cleaned its hot water tanks and air conditioning system and has shut down decorative and drinking water fountains and other potential sources of aerosolized water.

The veterans home has slightly more than 400 residents. Several dozen live independently but the rest live in a home similar to assisted living or a nursing home, Yantis said.

Legionnaires' disease has also been reported this summer at the San Quentin state prison in California and in New York, where 12 people died and more than 100 infected in an outbreak traced to bacteria found in a cooling tower on the roof of a Bronx hotel.

Health officials are advising the elderly and those who are sick or with compromised immune systems, including [organ transplant recipients](#), to not visit the home in Quincy. Access is otherwise not restricted, and residents are free to leave the home.

"When you're a Vietnam veteran and you're used to living off the field, you get used to it," resident Tom Meleski told the Quincy Herald-Whig. "They're taking every precaution for our safety and our well-being. It just requires a little more patience than you regularly have."

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Citation: Seven die from Legionnaires' disease at Illinois veterans home (2015, September 2)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-09-die-legionnaires-disease-illinois-veterans.html>

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