

Q&A: Legionnaires' disease adds to water concerns in Flint

January 14 2016, by Ed White

A water crisis in Flint has focused mostly on the impact of drinking supplies containing lead that had leached from old plumbing after the city switched sources to save money. But Michigan officials stunned the community this week when they also reported an increase in Legionnaires' disease cases over the past two years in Genesee County, where Flint is located.

There were at least 87 confirmed Legionnaires' cases, including 10 deaths, from June 2014 to November 2015, compared to only 21 cases in 2012 and 2013. Michigan [health officials](#) said they can't conclude that the increase was related to Flint's water, although concerned residents blitzed the county health department with phone calls Thursday.

Flint pulled water from the Flint River for 18 months until last fall but didn't use treatments that could have reduced corrosion and possibly removed other contaminants. Local officials declared a [public health emergency](#) in October in response to elevated levels of lead in children. Lead can cause behavior problems and learning disabilities in children as well as kidney ailments in adults.

Some questions and answers on Flint's [water crisis](#) and Legionnaires' disease:

WHAT IS LEGIONNAIRES' DISEASE?

The illness is a type of pneumonia caused by bacteria that infect the

lungs. The bacteria live in the environment and thrive in warm water. People can get sick if they inhale mist or vapor from contaminated water systems, hot tubs and cooling systems, but the bacteria don't spread from person to person. The elderly and people with chronic illnesses are most at risk. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with the disease each year, usually in summer and early fall.

COULD IT BE LINKED TO BAD WATER IN FLINT?

Michigan health officials said they can't conclude that the increase in Legionnaires' cases was related to Flint's water. But Marc Edwards, an environmental engineering professor at Virginia Tech who investigated high lead levels in Flint, tells The Associated Press it was "very likely." He said the risk of exposure to Legionella bacteria appeared to be low in homes and small buildings, based on his tests last year, but high levels were detected in larger buildings before the city switched back to the Detroit water system last fall. "This problem is probably behind us," he said on a Flint water study website.

COULD OTHER ILLNESSES BE RELATED TO THE WATER?

There's a key reason why officials know about Legionnaires' in the Flint area: Doctors and hospitals must report cases to public health agencies. Other illnesses that might be related to bacteria in water or soil typically don't have to be reported. "One could never draw the association," Edwards said. Speaking generally, Mark Valacak, chief health officer at the county health department, said his agency is always monitoring for communicable diseases.

WHAT RESPONSE IS NEEDED?

Flint residents already are being urged to use drinking water filters,

which are being distributed for free along with bottled water. No additional remedy is recommended for the Legionella bacteria because the illness isn't considered a present threat.

Unfiltered tap [water](#) for baths and showers is considered OK. Parents have asked Edwards about showers, and he agrees it's no riskier showering in Flint than in any other U.S. city.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is consulting with state and local health officials about the Legionnaires' cases.

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