



Legionellosis

What you should know about handling soils, compost and potting mix

If you handle garden soil, compost or potting mixes, you need to be aware of the possible risk of contracting Legionellosis (also known as Legionnaires Disease or Pontiac Fever).

What is Legionellosis?

Symptoms of legionellosis vary from a flu-like illness to severe pneumonia. Common early symptoms include loss of appetite, muscle pains, headache, abdominal pains and diarrhoea, with fever and a dry cough. The incubation period for the development of pneumonia is from two to ten days.

What causes this type of illness?

Legionellosis is caused by bacteria that occur naturally in the environment. About 50 different strains of Legionella bacteria are known. A person contracts the illness by breathing in dust or water vapour containing the bacteria. One strain of bacteria called Legionella pneumophilla has been responsible for illnesses linked to some types of air conditioning systems in buildings. Another strain called Legionella longbeachae occurs in soils, composts and potting mixes, and is responsible for more than half of all New Zealand cases.

Are some people more at risk than others?

The disease is more common in middle-aged and older people, smokers, people with underlying lung disease and other long term conditions such as diabetes, and those with weaker immune systems. If you come into one of these categories you should be especially careful to take precautions.

How is Legionellosis treated?

Usually patients are put on a course of antibiotics. The illness responds readily to treatment. It is important for the illness to be diagnosed and treated promptly because of the possibility that complications may develop.

Can you become immune to Legionellosis?

Yes, if exposed to Legionella bacteria your body builds up antibodies which gives immunity to future infection caused by that strain. This immunity is specific to the particular strain of Legionella to which you were exposed – you could be immune to one strain of Legionella and not another.



What should I do if I think I'm affected?

You should see your doctor immediately. Your doctor may arrange for you to have a blood test, sputum test or a chest x-ray. Your doctor can give you further information and advice.

How do I avoid getting Legionellosis?

To reduce the risk of contracting Legionellosis, here are the precautions you should take if handling soils, compost or potting mix:

- water gardens and composts gently, using a low-pressure hose.
- when opening bags of potting mix, do so slowly, making sure the opening is directed away from your face
- when potting plants, wet the soil first to reduce dust.
- avoid doing this work in unventilated places such as enclosed green houses or sheds

Use of a dust mask is recommended especially when these other measures are not practical or possible.

Further information

For people handling soil, potting mix and compost in the workplace advice should be sought from the Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment, as this agency is responsible for health and safety in the workplace.

For further information to prevent or reduce the chance of infection please contact a Health Protection Officer at Toi Te Ora – Public Health Service on 0800 221 555.

Sourced in part from: Legionellosis pamphlet 1994, Occupational Safety and Health Service, Department of Labour (now Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment).