August 13, 2015

Dear Colleagues,

Many of you are aware of the Legionnaires’ disease (Legionellosis) outbreak in the South Bronx (Zip Codes 10451, 10452, 10454, 10455 and 10456). The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) is leading the investigation and has identified cooling towers contaminated with Legionella bacteria as the source of the outbreak.

As of today, there are over 100 cases of Legionnaire’s disease in New York City, and there have been 12 deaths related to this outbreak. We are now seeing decreases in the frequency of diagnoses as well as in the number of emergency department visits for pneumonia in the South Bronx. There have been no new cases connected to the outbreak reported to the Health Department since August 3. In addition, people are seeking care promptly and getting treatment promptly. We’re optimistic that we’ve seen the worst of this outbreak, and that our remediation efforts are having an impact.

It is important to remember that Legionnaires’ disease is not spread from person to person. People only get sick by breathing in water vapor containing the bacteria. The risk of Legionnaires’ disease is higher for people who are heavy smokers, elderly or who have chronic lung disease or weakened immune systems.

Some people have expressed concerns about tap water: the tap water throughout the city, including in the South Bronx, is safe to drink and bathe with and is not part of the outbreak.

Because cooling towers have been linked to the current outbreak, the NYC DOHMH tested cooling towers in the area of the outbreak and ordered building owners to disinfect them. Of these cooling towers, all that tested positive have been disinfected, and the building owners have been ordered to put into place a long-term remediation plan to keep their towers free of Legionella. All cooling towers in the outbreak area with negative results have also been disinfected, with the exception of one tower that will complete disinfection in the next few days. In addition, on August 6 I ordered all owners of buildings with cooling towers citywide to disinfect their cooling towers within 14 days of receiving the order and to keep records of the inspection and disinfection on-site.
Special Guidance for City Employees Living in the South Bronx:

1. If your residential building has a cooling tower, it has either already been disinfected or has been ordered disinfected within 14 days of the owner receiving the order.

2. If you are now sick with a cough, headache, fever or muscle aches:
   • Seek medical care with your primary care provider right away.
   • Tell the provider that you work in the area involved in the Legionnaires’ disease outbreak.

3. If you are not sick, there is no need for you to see a doctor.

4. There is no reason to be concerned about your building’s plumbing system, tap water, drinking water or water fountains.

For additional information on Legionnaires’ disease and the City’s response, please visit nyc.gov/health. Your health and safety are very important to us.

Sincerely,

Mary T. Bassett, MD, MPH
Commissioner