Legionnaires’ Disease

What It Is
Legionnaires’ disease is a severe type of pneumonia caused by legionella bacteria.

There is also a milder illness called Pontiac Fever, which is caused by the same bacteria. The symptoms are flu-like lasting a few days. Treatment is not usually needed.

What It Is NOT
- Legionnaires’ disease is not contagious.
- It is not spread from person to person.

Legionella Bacteria
The bacteria can be found in lakes and streams and in drinking water. It grows well in warm water, but is killed at high temperatures.

A common place where the bacteria are found is in stagnant hot water pipes that are far from the heater, such as those in large buildings.

How You Get It
You can get Legionnaire’s disease by breathing in fine water droplets or mist from water that contains the legionella bacteria. The water may be from air conditioning cooling towers, hot tubs, or showers in large buildings or with old plumbing.

Most people exposed to the bacteria do not become sick. You are more likely to get the disease if you:
- Smoke
- Are older
- Have a long-term lung disease
- Have a weakened immune system.

Symptoms
Symptoms of the disease show up between 2 and 10 days after being exposed to the bacteria. Symptoms may include:
- Fever
- Chills
- Cough
- Muscle aches
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhea

Diagnosis
You will likely need a chest x-ray to diagnose the pneumonia. Lab tests on sputum, blood, or urine can detect the legionella bacteria.

Treatment
Legionnaires’ disease is treated with antibiotics. It is serious and can be life-threatening. However, most people recover with antibiotic treatment.