

Co-op City towers contaminated with Legionnaire's Disease bacteria



: Jennifer H. Cunningham

The city Health Department has found Legionnaire's Disease bacteria in the cooling towers of massive Bronx housing complex Co-op City. Eight of the 12 cases reported in the borough since December were diagnosed among Co-op City residents.

Potentially deadly bacteria has been found in a cooling tower at Co-op City, where eight residents have been diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease, city officials announced on Tuesday.

A preliminary Health Department study found the bacteria that is the cause of Legionnaires' disease in the tower used to cool the heating and electrical systems at the 15,000-unit north Bronx complex.

The shocking discovery comes after a recent Bronx spike in the potentially deadly illness, which is often

linked to pneumonia.

Eight of the 12 cases of Legionnaires reported in the borough since December have been diagnosed among Co-op City residents, officials said.

"I was shocked, terrified," said Co-op City tenant Brenda Hines, recalling her 29-year-old son Ronald's diagnosis in early December. "No parent should have to go through that."

Co-op City's management company, River Bay Corporation, started disinfecting the water in its cooling system with chlorine Saturday, officials said.

River Bay is paying a chemical treatment company \$200,000 to scrub down the tower to ensure the bacteria does not grow back, said its lawyer, Jeffrey Buss.

The bacteria likely formed in a film on the walls of the container "like a ring in a bathtub," according to Dr. Stephen Morse, a professor who specializes in infectious diseases at the Mailman Columbia School of Public Health.

Finding legionella is not unusual in such a container, Morse said, but it is rare to find human cases associated with exposure.

The infected water is separate from the water the complex's 50,000 residents use for drinking, cooking and bathing. It's also separate from the water used to heat the complex, Buss said.



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An image of the *Legionella pneumophila* bacteria distributed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Victims of the disease often experience pneumonia, fever, and a cough two weeks after being exposed.

Officials did not reveal the condition of those affected. Buss said seven of the eight people who came down with the illness lived in different buildings.

Victims develop fever, chills and cough two to 10 days after exposure to the bacteria, according to the Centers for Disease Control. Many come down with pneumonia.

The disease cannot be spread through person-to-person contact.

The best-known outbreak of Legionnaires' disease — and how it got its name — happened when 25 people died of the illness at the 1976 American Legion convention in Philadelphia.

Co-op City residents complained in March after it was disclosed that they had been kept in the dark about two previous incidences that sickened residents of one building in the complex in 2012 and 2013.

About 200 tenants peppered Health Department representatives with questions Tuesday night during a public meeting at a community center inside the complex.

"I'm concerned because my mom is sick," said Sandra Hernandez, 48, who has lived there for 15 years.

“And this could happen to anyone here.”

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