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Bacteria found in water system at Robert J. Dole V.A. hospital

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Legionella bacteria found in water system at Wichita VA hospital

WICHITA, Kan. - Wichita's Robert J. Dole V.A. Medical Center confirms a bacteria has been found in its water system.

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Last week, lab results from a case of pneumonia tested positive for Legionella, Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center

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Interim Chief of Staff, Dr. James Parker said.

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'Because of the suspicion, we decided to go ahead and do an additional round of water testing," said Parker. "The preliminary results did show Legionella bacteria in our water

system."

The preliminary results came back Monday. The VA has since started heating water to a certain temperature to kill the bacteria.

"That's what we are doing, basically as we speak," he said. "We've been doing that all day and we will continue on over the next several days."

The VA has also purchased filters for faucets and shower heads as people can contract Legionella by breathing it in, not by drinking the water.

"The organism is spread through inhaling bacteria," said Parker. "So you want to deal with those areas like showers first, and that's what we did."

There has been one case of Legionella confirmed at the VA and the hospital can't be certain the bacteria was contracted there.

"I can't say definitely that it was acquired here or acquired in the community," he said. "I can't say either with certainty."

No one else has gotten sick, the VA says.

The VA Medical Center sent a message out to employees Wednesday morning.

"We sent a message out to our staff today," said Parker. "As far as contacting individual patients, no we have not. We deal with risk and at this point we feel our facility is safe to operate and we'll go about business as usual."

The Center for Disease Control defines Legionella as one of the most frequent causes of waterborne disease among people in the United States.

Legionella is a germ that can cause a type of pneumonia called Legionellosis, most commonly known as Legionnaire's Disease, the CDC says.

Legionnaire's Disease can usually be treated with antibiotics, but the CDC confirms it can be fatal.

"The mortality rate is 5%-30% in an outbreak," said Chris Steward, epidemiologist with the Sedgwick County Health Department. "So it can be low or it can be high."

Steward said most people who come in contact with the bacteria won't get sick.

"People who are at increase risk for illness are older people, current or former smokers, people who have weakened immune systems and people with chronic lung infections like COPD," she said. "Most people who are exposed to the bacteria do not become ill."

According to the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, there were 18 cases of legionellosis last year in the state of Kansas. Two of those were in Sedgwick County.

"Most people with Legionnaires Disease have pneumonia like symptoms like high fever, cough, shortness of breath," said Steward. "It's a common bacteria, just becoming ill is uncommon."

There have been several cases of the disease reported at VA hospitals nationally over the past few years.

Last month, a 64-year-old man treated for pneumonia at a VA hospital in Bay Pines Florida who died at the hospital, tested positive for Legionella.

The CDC says Legionella is not spread from person to person, but can naturally be found in water, especially warm water.

People can become infected with the bacteria when they breathe in steam or mist from contaminated water, including in a hot tub.

Legionella can also be found in cooling towers, plumbing systems and decorative pools or fountains, the CDC says.

While it is unknown how the VA Center in Wichita became contaminated, Steward says it often comes down to cleanliness.

"If people don't clean and disinfect their water sources and especially warm water sources, then the bacteria could get in there and multiply and cause disease," she said.

Between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionaire's Disease each year, the CDC says.

We're following the latest on the discovery of Legionella at the VA Hospital in Wichita and will keep you updated.