

Legionnaires' Outbreak on Upper East Side Kills One and Sickens Six

By [SARAH MASLIN NIR](#) JUNE 16, 2017

One person is dead and six other people have been sickened in an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, the city health department announced on Friday.

The patients with the bacterial infection, which is typically contracted through contaminated water, fell ill within the past 11 days in the Lenox Hill neighborhood, said the agency, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

Four remain hospitalized, and two have recovered and been released. The person who died was over 90, according to the department, and suffered from other health problems. The department has begun an investigation of air-conditioning equipment in the neighborhood, looking for signs of the Legionella bacteria.

“We know that this is an organism that exists in our environment, and we don't expect to be able to eradicate it,” said Dr. Mary T. Bassett, the health commissioner. “From a public health point of view, we want to be able to get a handle on clusters that may have a common source, but we hardly ever are able to identify them.”

In the Lenox Hill outbreak, where the patients are linked by geography, chances of finding the source may be better. Inspectors have looked at all cooling systems within about half a mile of the affected area, 116 in total, Dr. Bassett said. But results of the investigation will take up to two weeks — the bacteria must be cultured in a lab, and grow slowly, she said.

In the past, contaminated cooling systems have been identified as the source of outbreaks of Legionnaires', including one in 2015, in the South Bronx, that [killed 15 people and sickened more than 70](#). That outbreak was linked to rooftop cooling towers in the area. Recent, smaller outbreaks have been reported, including one last week, where the bacteria were found in the water systems of an [East Harlem police station](#) after an officer fell ill. The officer has since recovered, the Police Department said.

Each year, 200 to 400 cases of the illness are recorded in New York City, the health department said. After the 2015 Bronx outbreak, the city passed legislation requiring better monitoring of cooling towers. Since then, the health department said, it has monitored more than 6,000 towers for the bacteria, which flourish in warm water.

In an effort to discover the sources of infection, the department uses computer algorithms to determine links between cases and employs specially trained investigators to interview people who were infected.

People with depressed immune systems, those over 50 and smokers are particularly vulnerable to the bacteria, which cause symptoms similar to [the flu](#) or [pneumonia](#) and can be treated with a similar course of [antibiotics](#).

“Legionnaires’ disease is completely treatable, and it has the best outcome when people are diagnosed early,” Dr. Bassett said.