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Legionnaire's Disease Appears at a Hospital in New Rochelle

By [ANAHAD O'CONNOR](#)

An outbreak of Legionnaires' disease has struck Sound Shore Medical Center in New Rochelle, sickening at least nine patients and prompting the county health department to investigate whether six more people with possible symptoms of the condition are also infected.

The nine who contracted the disease, a common but sometimes deadly bacterial infection that occurs in people with weakened immune systems, were all outpatients who used the same entrance at the medical center in the past month, said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, the Westchester County health commissioner. He said that the patients might have picked up the bacterial infection by inhaling water vapor as they walked past a possibly contaminated cooling tower near the hospital, and that all are either in stable condition or have fully recovered.

Only 7 to 10 cases of Legionnaires' disease turn up in the county in a typical year. Because its symptoms can take several weeks to appear, and are often mistaken for those of pneumonia or another flulike illness, health officials suspect there may be other people who picked up the infection near the cooling tower but do not yet know it.

"We're casting a very wide net because we don't want to miss anybody," Dr. Lipsman said. "We're asking any adults with an underlying medical condition who may have passed by this cooling tower in the last few weeks and then developed breathing problems to go see a doctor and ask whether they have legionella."

The news of the nine cases follows a small but serious outbreak of Legionnaires' disease that struck New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center's Milstein Hospital Building in Washington Heights in April, killing two patients and prompting some experts to call for more aggressive steps to prevent the disease in the nation's hospitals.

The bacteria that cause it are almost always present in most cities' water supplies, though it rarely causes sickness in people unless they have a chronic medical condition or underlying illness. People in hospitals are among those most susceptible to the disease, but most medical centers are not required to test for it, nor do they routinely disinfect their water supplies.

Dr. Victor Yu, an expert on the disease, said that roughly 70 percent of hospitals in New York State would find the bacteria if they looked for it, and that many patients die from the disease without anyone knowing they were infected.

"This is starting to sound like a broken record," said Dr. Yu, who is chief of infectious diseases at the Pittsburgh Veterans Administration Health Care Center. "There are all these susceptible patients just waiting to get Legionnaires'. We're having outbreaks all over the country, not just in New York State, and every one of them is preventable."

The latest outbreak became apparent after county health officials noticed that four people in New Rochelle had contracted the disease since June 21. Health officials discovered that they had all used the hospital's outpatient entrance, which is near a cooling tower. Preliminary tests on samples of the water from the tower came back positive for legionella, but Sal Schliro, a spokesman for Sound Shore, said the hospital would not be certain it was the source until a second round of tests were finished. In the meantime, he said, the hospital has added extra chlorine to its water and has taken other measures to kill the bacteria. He said he did not know whether the hospital routinely tested its water supply for legionella, but suggested that it might now begin to look for it more

often.

"This certainly took us by surprise," he said. "It's not a requirement to test for it. But certainly if we think there are incidents of it around, we will test."

In May, the hospital's cooling tower tested negative for legionella. Dr. Lipsman said it may have become tainted since then because of humid weather and recent heavy rains, which together can promote the growth of legionella.