

Legionnaires' disease found in Graham nursing facility

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Two Peak Resources residents ill

GRAHAM — Two residents of Peak Resources have come down with pneumonia-like Legionnaires' disease, and the Alamance County Health Department is working with the skilled-nursing facility to prevent more cases.

“The facility really has complied and been very communicative with us and been very responsive to the recommendations we've given,” county Health Director Stacie Saunders said.

The department was notified of the second case at the 120-bed facility on College Street the evening of Friday, Sept. 15. It is standard practice to test the water in a facility like Peak Resources when two or more people are infected with the water-borne bacterium, Saunders said. It will take about two weeks for those results to come back, and in the meantime, residents have been living on bottled water.

That is probably about to change. The facility started installing water filters on faucets fine enough to block the Legionella bacteria — 0.2 microns — and once the filters are inspected to make sure they have been properly installed, water restrictions can be lifted, Saunders said.

“These are all recommendations that we have put in place for the safety of the residents and the staff because we don't know the source of the contamination at this time,” Saunders said.

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The Legionella bacteria are naturally found in water — usually warm water — but most people exposed to it don't get sick. People older than 50 and those with weakened respiratory or immune systems can be vulnerable, and the result is what the Centers for Disease Control calls a “very serious type of pneumonia.” Current and former smokers and those taking certain cancer drugs are more often infected than others.

People don't spread the disease directly to each other, but get it from airborne droplets of contaminated water. Showers, fountains, hot tubs and cooling towers of large air-conditioning systems are common sources of Legionella bacteria. The bacteria also can grow in places with complex water systems, like hospitals, hotels and cruise ships.

The number of cases increased nearly four and a half times from 2000 to 2015. At least 6,000 people reported having Legionnaires' disease across the country in 2015, according to the CDC, though it is likely under-reported.

The condition of the two victims of Legionnaires' disease in Graham will not be released because of health privacy regulations, according to Saunders.

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