

WCU employee tests positive for Legionnaires' disease

WEST CHESTER >> A West Chester University employee has tested positive for Legionnaires' disease and eight cooling towers of buildings on the campus have higher than acceptable levels of the bacteria, the university revealed Wednesday.

According to an e-mail sent to all WCU employees and also to the Daily Local News, on Wednesday the university received confirmation that one of its employees had tested positive for legionella bacteria (Legionnaires' disease). Once the employee had alerted the University of the symptoms, the University hired a firm to test for the legionella bacteria in the employee's workplace, as well as other campus buildings.

According to the employee e-mail, test results recently came back from the laboratory that indicated that the employee's workplace location was negative, but a higher-than-acceptable level of the bacteria was found in eight of the cooling towers of the campus buildings.

Those buildings are: 201 Carter Drive, SOMPAC, FHG Library, Main Hall, Merion Science Center, Schmucker Science Center, Sykes Student Union, and Lawrence Hall.

Based on the presence of the legionella bacteria, the University engaged a remediation firm that is treating the affected cooling towers Wednesday and Thursday to kill the legionella bacteria. The University will continue to monitor the cooling towers to verify that the bacteria have not returned, and regularly will test and treat all cooling towers, according to the e-mail.

The e-mail adds that "As part of our response, the University also contacted the Chester County Health Department, who provided health information regarding Legionnaires' disease." The e-mail said that the presence of legionella bacteria does not mean that a person will contract Legionnaires' disease. Since the bacteria exist naturally in the environment, people often receive low-level exposure without contracting the disease. The bacteria also cannot be passed from person to person.

According to the federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the bacterium got its

name after a 1976 outbreak, when many people who went to a Philadelphia convention of the American Legion suffered from this disease, a type of pneumonia (lung infection). Although this type of bacterium was around before 1976, more illness from Legionnaires' disease is being detected now, said the CDC website.

According to the CDC, each year, between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease in the U.S. However, many infections are not diagnosed or reported, so this number may be higher. More illness is usually found in the summer and early fall, but it can happen any time of year.

Officials at the university were not available for comment Wednesday.