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Legionnaires' case spurs water restrictions at Baltimore apartment building

Otterbein building affected after case is reported in July

By Natalie Sherman, The Baltimore Sun

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Water restrictions remain in place at the Hanover Square Apartments in Otterbein, where one resident was diagnosed with Legionnaires' disease in mid-July, according to the city's Health Department.

The July 18 case is the only one associated with the 1 West Conway Street tower, where the city is monitoring efforts to test and clear the water, said Health Department spokesman Michael Schwartzberg. He said he did not have more information about the patient's status.

Legionnaires' disease, a type of pneumonia, spreads through the inhalation of tiny droplets of contaminated water. It is typically treated with antibiotics, but can be fatal.

With an isolated case, the city notifies the building manager, but does not require water restrictions, Schwartzberg said. The restrictions at Hanover Square were imposed by the property manager and remain in place because results from water tests have not returned, he said.

"We agree with their steps, to place themselves on water restrictions," he said in an email.

People in the nearly 200-unit subsidized senior housing community have been barred from using tap water for drinking, cooking and showers for about a month, said four residents of the Hanover Square apartments, who did not want to give their names. They said the property manager, Edgewood Management, has provided bottled water and recommended taking baths instead of showers.

Edgewood Management declined to comment. The firm also manages the Apostolic Towers in East Baltimore, subsidized senior housing where two cases of the disease were reported earlier this year.

The National Foundation for Affordable Housing Solutions Inc., the affordable housing nonprofit that owns the Hanover Square building, could not be reached for comment.

About 27 cases of Legionnaires' disease have been reported to the city this year, Schwartzberg said. There were 30 cases last year and 28 in 2012.

Nationally, between 8,000 and 18,000 people are hospitalized due to Legionnaires' disease each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Symptoms include fever, dry cough, muscle aches, abdominal cramps and diarrhea. Older people, smokers and those with weakened immune systems are particularly at risk.

The bacteria that cause Legionnaires' disease occur naturally in water, but typically at very low or undetectable levels. Their presence can be amplified in certain conditions, such as warm or stagnant water.

Superheating or superchlorinating is recommended to clear the system of the bacteria, while residents observe water restrictions, according to the CDC. A follow-up check is typically conducted within 24 to 48 hours, but the problem can recur if the overall conditions do not change, according to guidelines published in 2000 by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air Conditioning Engineers.

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