

Queen's Medical Center takes action after patients treated for Legionnaires' disease

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Posted: Jun 19, 2018 03:45 PM HST

Updated: Jun 20, 2018 03:31 PM HST

HONOLULU (KHON2) - Queen's Medical Center says it is testing its Punchbowl hospital for Legionella bacteria after recently treating four patients with Legionnaires' disease.

Legionnaires' disease can cause severe pneumonia and can be deadly in some cases.

Officials say this is the first hospital in Hawaii to ever test for Legionella bacteria.

"Here in Hawaii, this is fortunately, unfortunately the first instance. It is something that going forward just like every other state, every other jurisdiction, we are looking at much for closely," said Dr. Sarah Park, state epidemiologist.

We're told two of the Legionella cases may have happened outside of Queen's. Water samples at the hospital were taken Tuesday to find out if the other two may have gotten Legionella after they were admitted.

It could take a week to get the results back.

"It does appear right now that may be the case hence why we are doing. Part of our investigation is focusing on the facility here, but we haven't ruled out all potential issues and again, it's very early in the investigation," said Park.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to investigate these cases and all potential sources of Legionella exposure within and outside of the hospital.

The Hawaii State Department of Health told KHON2 it collected environmental samples at Queen's Medical Center.

In the meantime, a spokesperson for the hospital says Queen's is proactively asking all healthcare providers to take additional precautions with patients who are at greatest risk of contract the disease. It's recommending that high-risk patients avoid exposure to tap water in any form at Queen's.

Under state and federal guidelines, that means they are avoiding:

- Drinking water from a fountain,
- Using ice from the ice machine,
- Taking showers, and
- Flushing toilets.

We're told there have been no closures at the hospital at this time.

"So if you look at other cases of Legionnaires' disease at other hospitals across the nation, that is normally the case. It's very rarely that you would close down a hospital system. That's quite a severe case," said Park.

Queen's says it has taken a number of measures to ensure the safety and well being of patients and staff, some of which include increased chlorination of water, increased surveillance water cultures and testing in conjunction with DOH and water experts, scheduled running of showers and faucets as part of routine room cleaning, and replacement of laminar flow devices on faucets.

"That's the thing at the bottom of the faucet that prevents the spraying out in all directions, so that's the last point of contact when water comes out of the pipe," said Dr. Erlaine Bello, medical director of the infection control department at Queen's.

Legionella is spread through water that has been aerosolized. It is most likely to occur in people who have weakened immune systems. It is not readily transmissible from person to person. Legionella is found in water and soil, and most people exposed to the bacteria do not become ill.

You can get it by inhaling the bacteria through water sources like showers and air conditioners.

"It's a matter of just reminding everyone that we have to maintain our water system," said Park, "but especially in our hospitals, because as I said earlier, these are our people that are at highest risk."

The Hawaii State Department of Health said the four cases are still under investigation and it's working to determine if the cases are linked with a common source of infection. The DOH also included this statement:

The Hawaii Department of Health (DOH) is investigating additional suspected cases of Legionnaires' disease in four Honolulu residents and is working closely with health care partners and Queen's Medical Center. Prevention measures are in place and environmental samples have been collected and are being tested to identify possible sources of the disease.

DOH is working closely with QMC and other partners to ensure the health and safety of patients and staff.

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