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Disease source eyed in 10 cases

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Health officials are investigating 10 cases of Legionnaires' disease in people from Bexar and Comal counties over the past two months to determine if they were infected from a single source.

Two of the 10 have died, although one death involved a patient suffering from advanced colon and lung cancer. All were older adults -- the youngest was over 50 -- and all had some medical condition including cancer and chronic lung disease that weakened their immune systems and increased their risk of contracting the bacterial pneumonia. One patient had recently undergone cosmetic surgery.

Healthy people generally are not at risk from Legionnaires' disease. The illness is not spread through person-to-person contact, but by inhaling contaminated droplets.

Seven of the patients live in Bexar County, which normally sees a handful of cases each year -- mostly in warmer months. The fact that all 10 cases were diagnosed in two North Side **hospitals**, and took place over the past two months, prompted the concern.

"We're looking to see if there's some sort of commonality," said Roger Sanchez, an epidemiologist with the Metropolitan Health District, which is heading the probe with help from state health authorities and a four-person team from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The CDC team arrived on Monday.

Investigators are interviewing patients, going over **hospital** medical records and testing water sources for the bacteria. In past years, Sanchez said, Legionella bacteria has been found on hotel shower heads, in hot tubs and even the automated vegetable sprayers in a grocery store.

But the bacteria is also found readily in nature, and it might well be that no common exposure took place, said Dr. Sandra Guerra-Cantu, regional medical director with the Texas Department of State Health Services.

"At this point we don't know for sure that there is a common exposure," said Guerra-Cantu. "Even if we find a common exposure, usually it's easily corrected. I wouldn't want the public to panic about this."

Each year, thousands of people nationwide are hospitalized with Legionnaires' disease, which was named for an outbreak at the 1976 American Legion conference in

Philadelphia. The disease is fatal in about a third of cases, although the bacteria can also cause a milder illness with cold-like symptoms called Pontiac fever. Both illnesses are treated with antibiotics.

The CDC team was sent in part because its laboratory is one of the few places that can process some of the tests, Guerra-Cantu said. The team also uses events like this to train its epidemiologists, she added.

Investigators will ask patients about possible sources of exposure -- commercial cooling towers, fountains, outdoor water sources -- even the mist sprayers used on patios.

"Anywhere the investigation will lead us that more than one person lists as a possible exposure, we'll investigate further," Guerra-Cantu said.

The two North Side **hospitals** weren't identified by health authorities, but the Baptist Health System released a written statement that two of their facilities had cared for Legionnaires' patients. "Staff and physicians have a heightened awareness and are working closely with public health officials to deal with this influx," the statement read.

Baptist operates three North Side **hospitals**: Northeast Baptist, North Central Baptist and St. Luke's Baptist. Although the **hospitals** are being tested as possible sources of the infection, investigators also are going over records at those and other local **hospitals** to see if any other cases were missed.

A San Antonio outbreak in 1996 included 16 people. The source of that infection was never found, Sanchez said.

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