

# 'Concerning' cluster of legionnaires' disease cases detected in New Westminster

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This colorized 8000X electron micrograph image shows a large grouping of Gram-negative *Legionella pneumophila* bacteria. (AP / Janice Haney Carr)

VANCOUVER -- Health officials are investigating a "concerning" cluster of cases of legionnaires' disease in New Westminster.

Fraser Health said six people from New Westminster and the surrounding area have caught the disease since June, and two are currently hospitalized.

That represents an unusual spike for a single municipality, according to medical health officer Dr. Aamir Bharmal.

"In the Fraser Health region, usually we see anywhere from four to 15 cases in a whole year – so the fact that we're seeing, in just one city, six cases in the last three months is the thing that's concerning," Bharmal said.

Health officials are investigating the potential source of the exposures, but haven't made any conclusions. Bharmal said it does appear to have happened "around the downtown or the Quay area."

Legionnaires' disease is caused by the legionella bacterium, which is commonly found in freshwater, groundwater and soil. It can spread in building water systems, including "cooling towers, hot tubs that aren't drained after each use, decorative fountains, and large plumbing systems," Fraser Health said in a news release.

Most healthy people who are exposed to legionella don't get sick, but the bacterium can pose a serious risk to the elderly, smokers and people who are immunocompromised.

Bharmal said the people who have fallen ill in New Westminster fit that profile. They're between the ages of 50 and 70 and many have underlying medical conditions.

Legionnaires' disease has an incubation period of up to 19 days, and people who are infected can develop pneumonia, fever, shortness of breath, severe fatigue, abdominal pain and diarrhea.

In severe cases, it can be fatal.

Fraser Health urged anyone who is at higher risk and develops pneumonia-like symptoms to seek medical attention, and to tell their doctor if they were in New Westminster within 19 days of their symptoms developing.