



Ask the Ellis Whittam Experts

LEGIONELLA

Nick Wilson, Director of Health & Safety Services at Ellis Whittam, takes a closer look at the bacteria known as Legionella



What is Legionella?

Legionella is a dangerous bacterium that can infiltrate your water system. Originating in natural water supplies, this bacteria can proliferate in most man-made water sources, given appropriate conditions. The bacteria thrive especially well in stagnant water, or conditions where the temperature is between 20-45°C. Any available nutrients, such as limescale, also encourage the growth of Legionella.

So it's dangerous?

The Legionella bacterium is known to cause illness, *if inhaled*. Whilst drinking water containing Legionella bacteria may not be harmful, you can be affected if the bacteria are dispersed in the form of an aerosol or spray. Taps and other devices such as showers can create this type of harmful mist when in operation.

Can Legionella make you ill?

Yes, Legionella bacteria can make anyone ill, as inhaling bacteria saturated droplets causes diseases such as Pontiac fever and Legionnaires' disease. As a form of fatal pneumonia, Legionnaires' disease can cause death. It is often underdiagnosed, due to flu like symptoms, and it is especially lethal to the elderly, or any vulnerable adults with underlying health issues.

Where is Legionella found?

The bacteria can proliferate in most man-made water supplies including: hot and cold water systems; showers; cooling towers; spa pools; evaporative condensers and even your car windscreen washer reservoir.

How can we reduce it?

Simple control measures can help reduce the risk of exposure to Legionella such as:

- flushing out the system prior to letting a property
- avoiding debris getting into the system (eg. ensure the cold water tanks, where fitted, have a tight fitting lid)
- setting control parameters (eg. setting the temperature of the calorifier to ensure water is stored at 60°C)
- making sure any redundant pipework is removed



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What are the legal requirements?

If you have management responsibility for your business premises and you use or store water, which may be transmitted via inhalable water droplets such as mists and aerosols, then you must comply with the regulations set out by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH, 2002) sets out a framework to help you understand Legionella and actions you must take to reduce the risks in your workplace.

You can also obtain further guidance from the Approved Code of Practice (L8). You are required to identify potential risks and threats, manage them and prevent them from reoccurring. Sufficient records must be maintained and updated, including information about any works undertaken. You should talk to your Health & Safety Consultant for expert advice, specialist support and tailored Legionella training.



Colleen, Senior Health & Safety Consultant

What action do we need to take?

As an employer or a person in control of premises, you must appoint a Competent Person capable of helping you manage your health and safety duties. As part of this, you should carry out a risk assessment to identify and assess any risks in your water system. The Competent Person should understand your water systems and any associated equipment in order to determine whether the system is likely to create a risk from exposure to Legionella.

If you conclude that the risks are insignificant, your assessment is complete. You may not need take any further action at this stage but you should review the assessment regularly in case anything changes in your system.

What if we identify a risk?

If you identify a risk that you are unable to prevent, you must introduce appropriate controls. You should introduce a documented course of action that will help you to control any risks from Legionella by describing:

- your system and its component parts eg. developing a schematic diagram
- who is responsible for carrying out the assessment and managing its implementation
- the safe and correct operation of your system
- what control methods and other precautions you will be using
- what checks will be carried out to ensure risks are being managed and how often

Should we just risk it?

Perhaps you don't have the time - your schedule is busy and Legionella is not top of your priority list. However, you need to be aware of potential long term repercussions if you do not ensure sufficient Legionella compliance. For example, you can face substantial fines and law suits should a member of staff or a customer in your care contract Legionnaires' disease. In addition, your company reputation can suffer, affecting revenue growth and business continuity.

Elis Whittam can conduct a Legionella Risk Assessment for you and help to implement measures to control any risks identified.

