

Officials Are Seeking Source Legionnaire's Disease at High-Rise

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FORT LEE, N.J., Nov. 1 - State and local health officials are awaiting test results from a high-rise apartment building here to determine the source and strain of the Legionnaire's disease that sickened two elderly residents and has led to the shutdown of the building's water system.

A 78-year-old woman with lung cancer who lives in the co-op building, the Colony, was found to be infected with the airborne bacterium last week, and the disease was diagnosed in another resident, described as an elderly man, in June, Stephen Wielkocz, Fort Lee's chief health officer, said on Monday.

Both residents have recovered, Mr. Wielkocz said, but a preliminary test on Friday found Legionella pneumophila, the bacterium that causes the disease, inside one of the building's water heaters, prompting health officials to shut off tap water in the building.

Final test results are expected within 24 hours, and the water could remain off for up to two weeks while the water system is decontaminated, health officials said.

The approximately 1,000 residents who live in the building are using bottled water to drink and bathe. Toilets are operational.

"At this point, the water in the building is no longer a risk because it cannot be used," Mr. Wielkocz said. "I also don't expect any more cases of Legionnaire's disease to be diagnosed, but if it does happen at least it won't come as a shock, and we will be able to respond accordingly."

Legionnaire's disease is named for a deadly outbreak of the illness at an American Legion convention at a Philadelphia hotel in 1976. The disease strikes about 8,000 to 18,000 people each year, with 5 to 30 percent of cases causing death, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The bacterium typically grows in standing water and can be spread through air-conditioning ducts and in the water vapor from hot tubs and showers using contaminated water.

The disease is most common in late summer and early fall, and is often mistaken for the flu or pneumonia because of similar symptoms, like high fever, nausea, loss of appetite and headaches. Elderly citizens, especially those who smoke, are most susceptible to the disease, Mr. Wielkocz said. According to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, Legionnaire's disease has been found in 61 state residents this year.

On Monday, several residents at the 32-story building at 1530 Palisade Avenue said the initial shock and fear had faded and been replaced with frustration.

"At this point, it's nothing more than a physical inconvenience because the water is still shut off," said a resident who identified herself only as Carole. "Officials told us that the risk of contracting the disease is minimal, and in the meantime the mayor and Police Department have been great in getting us the water and resources we need. Hopefully, this will all be over soon."