



1 dead, 15 sickened in Newark by Legionnaire's disease

By Carly Rothman/The Star-Ledger

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State and local health officials are investigating a cluster of Legionnaire's disease in Newark and Irvington that has sickened 15 people and resulted in the death of an elderly man.

The illnesses took place between Oct. 1 and Oct. 31.

The disease, which causes respiratory illness, can be spread through the inhalation of aerosolized contaminated water, such as water in a shower, or a heating or cooling system. Cooling towers in residential buildings have been the source of outbreaks in the past, as well as other water sources.

Health officials are doing an environmental assessment in the affected areas of Newark and Irvington, but have yet to do any testing.

The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services has alerted hospital emergency departments in the area to report cases of the disease. Health officials also have interviewed patients with the disease, as well as their families.

Eight of the 15 people live within a 1.5 mile radius in the southern part of Newark and Irvington. The ages of the eight people range from 49 to 82, the age of the man who died. Officials have not given the names or addresses of those infected.

Legionnaire's disease generally is acquired in the community, though rare outbreaks occur in nursing homes or hospitals. Last year 116 people in New Jersey contracted the disease, most of them in the community, state health officials said.

In September and early October, an outbreak of the illness at Saint Peter's University Hospital in New Brunswick caused the deaths of three patients. Tests run on the hospital's water system found the presence of the Legionella bacteria. The hospital raised the chlorine level of the system.

Older people, smokers and those with weakened immune systems are the most likely to become sick after being exposed to the bacteria, which can flourish in air conditioning systems, whirlpool spas and, in some cases, potting soil.

The bacteria was identified six months after thousands of American Legionnaires gathered to celebrate the American bicentennial in July, 1976. Hundreds became ill with symptoms of severe pneumonia and 34 died.