

Legionella bacteria found in tap water at Syracuse's Van Duyn nursing home

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Rick Moriarty/The Post-Standard

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Post-Standard, 2001 Residents of the third floor of Van Duyn walk down the hallway before dinner is served in this photo from Jan. 15, 2001.

Syracuse, NY -- The Legionella bacteria has been found again in the tap water supply at the Onondaga County-owned Van Duyn Home & Hospital nursing home, prompting officials there to provide bottled water to residents at risk of becoming ill from the bacteria.

Dr. Cynthia Morrow, Onondaga County health commissioner, said the bacteria is commonly found in soil and water supplies. It can cause pneumonia-like symptoms, known as Legionnaires' disease, if it gets into a person's lungs.

Morrow said the bacteria poses no threat in normal concentrations to healthy people but can be a threat to persons whose health already is compromised by other medical conditions, especially severe lung diseases.

She said a resident of the nursing home who died in April had the bacteria, but that it is not known if it was the cause of the person's death. A second Van Duyn resident who contracted the bacteria and became ill earlier this year has recovered, she said.

A **Van Duyn resident who died last summer also had the bacteria**, but it also is not known if it caused that person's death, she said.

Morrow said it is not known whether the residents got the bacteria from the tap water at the nursing home or from other sources.

There are five to 15 cases of people becoming sick from Legionella in Onondaga County each year, and in most cases the source of the bacteria cannot be identified, she said.

This is not the first time that the bacteria has been found in the water at Van Duyn. In the summer of 2008, an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease in the Onondaga Hill area sickened 13 people, one of whom died. Public health officials pinpointed the source of that outbreak to an air-conditioning cooling tower at Community General Hospital.

During the course of that investigation, public health officials discovered Legionella in Van Duyn's water system.

Since then, Van Duyn has been working in consultation with the state Department of Health to ensure the nursing home's water supply is safe, Morrow said. The nursing home routinely tests its tap water, she said.

Legionnaires' disease and the bacteria that causes it got their names in 1976, when dozens of people at a Philadelphia convention of the American Legion suffered from an outbreak of the disease and 34 of them died.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, **Legionella is found naturally in the environment** and grows best in warm water, like the kind found in hot tubs, cooling towers, hot water tanks, large plumbing systems and parts of the air-conditioning systems of large buildings.

People get Legionnaires' disease when they breathe in a mist or vapor that has been contaminated with the bacteria. It can be treated with antibiotics, but up to 30 percent of patients who contract the disease die from it.

Those most at risk of getting sick from the bacteria are the elderly, smokers, people with chronic lung diseases and people with weakened immune systems.

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