

Legionnaires' cases triple in Florida since 2000

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After a dream vacation at Disney in 2006, Joe Massey returned home to Virginia and fell ill with pneumonia-like symptoms.

His doctors, baffled by Massey's high fever and nausea, didn't uncover the cause -- Legionnaires' disease -- until it was too late to save the 38-year-old nuclear engineer from Hampton.

Even today, more than three decades after it was first diagnosed and just days after two new cases surfaced at an Orlando-area hotel, Legionnaires' disease remains a growing and, some say, misunderstood and misdiagnosed illness.

Known for affecting travelers, the disease is caused by a bacterium that thrives in pools and spas.

In Florida, where the number of cases nearly tripled since 2000 to 155 last year, including 10 deaths, officials say the health risk is minor considering the millions of residents of Florida and tourists who visit the state annually.

But Massey's widow and some consumer advocates, government activists and researchers say Florida, which ranks fourth in the nation in Legionnaires' cases, should do more to raise awareness of the disease.

"We always talk about patients participating in their health care, and they can't do that unless they're informed," said Janet Stout, a microbiologist and professor at the University of Pittsburgh who has studied the disease for 25 years.

Dain Weister, a spokesman for the Orange County Health Department, said the reason officials don't publicize all the cases is because other more serious health concerns are taking priority and because the big picture -- 13 sickened in a county of more than 1 million in 2007, for instance -- suggests low risk.

"It's not an astronomical number," he said. "It's not a sign we've got a major problem."

Typically, health officials don't seek publicity about the illness unless two or more cases are potentially linked. That's why health officials held a news conference Friday after they learned that two tourists who contracted Legionnaires' had stayed at a Quality Suites near Universal Studios.

The two tourists were being treated at an unidentified hospital in Pinellas County, officials said Monday.

Meanwhile, local health officials continued to take samples at the hotel. Air-quality test results could take several days, but water tests could take about two weeks. Officials said most of the rooms have been cleaned and re-opened to the public, but the pool and spa are still off-limits.

The last outbreak in Florida was in early 2006, when three people developed the disease and one of them -- an 82-year-old woman only identified as an out-of-state resident -- died after staying at the Seagarden Inn in the Daytona Beach area. An investigation pointed to an indoor spa as the likely culprit.

This year a visitor to the same hotel, which is now called The Islander Resort, developed Legionnaires' in January and recently died, though the cause of death hasn't been confirmed, health officials said. His daughter said he was from Wisconsin.

Tim Stockman, a vice president for Ocean Waters, the company that owns and manages the hotel, said the Volusia health department did tests at The Islander Resort and found no evidence of the bacteria that cause Legionnaires'.

Stefany Strong, a spokeswoman for the Volusia County Health Department, confirmed that someone from her agency went to the hotel for an environmental health assessment, though she didn't have details about what tests were conducted.

The naturally occurring bacteria infect people who inhale tainted water vapor or mist, and the state says one of the best ways to prevent the disease is to keep pools and spas clean.

On a routine basis, health officials test pools and spas to ensure they are properly chlorinated, though they don't routinely test for Legionnaires' disease.

The disease was first identified after an outbreak at the Pennsylvania American Legion convention at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia in July 1976, when 29 people died.

Nationally, estimates about the number of Legionnaires' cases varies, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimating about 8,000 to 18,000 cases "but only a fraction of these are reported," according to the CDC's Web site.

Researchers at the Special Pathogens Laboratory in Pittsburgh say about 17,000 to 23,000 people are hospitalized annually, and they estimate about 20 percent die.

The lab, recognized internationally for its study of the disease, thinks its estimate is low, though. A study by another research group suggests about two out of 10 Legionnaires' cases are correctly diagnosed. Most are misdiagnosed as other forms of pneumonia.

Had she known more about the disease, Jane Massey thinks she could have told the doctors about it, and it may have saved her husband's life.

For Joe Massey's first vacation in a decade, the family spent a week on Disney property, staying at the Port Orleans Resort and visiting theme parks. Jane Massey thinks her husband must have caught Legionnaires' during their vacation because he got sick just days after returning home, which is consistent with the incubation period for the disease.

Disney spokeswoman Kim Prunty said no evidence has been found that Joe Massey picked up the bacteria at a Disney property.

She said the company goes to great lengths to prevent Legionnaires', including routine maintenance and monitoring of air-conditioning systems, hot-water heaters and swimming pools.

Massey thinks hotels should go an extra step and post prevention tips.

"I'm sure people staying at the resort would have probably liked to know my husband got sick," she said. "I'd never heard of anyone getting it anymore -- or dying from it."