

Date: 2 June 2020

Legionnaires' cases prompt gardening warning

Hunter New England Local Health District is urging the community to be careful when using potting mix after three cases of confirmed Legionnaires' disease in recent weeks.

All three people resided in the Newcastle and Hunter region and had recently purchased potting mix for use in gardening.

Legionnaires' disease is an infection of the lungs (pneumonia) caused by bacteria of the Legionella family. Infection occurs when a person breathes in bacteria that are commonly found in the environment. Legionnaires' disease is not spread from person to person.

Dr Kathryn Taylor, a public health physician with Hunter New England Health, said although the bacteria that causes Legionnaires' disease is usually associated with air conditioning or water systems, another species of Legionella (*Legionella longbeachae*) is common in soil and potting mix.

People can reduce exposure to potting mix dust by following the manufacturers' warnings present on potting mix labels, including:

- Wetting down the potting mix to reduce the dust
- Wearing gloves and a P2 mask when using potting mix
- Washing your hands after handling potting mix or soil, and before eating or drinking

"We understand that due to COVID-19 restrictions a lot of people have been spending more time at home in their gardens," Dr Taylor said.

Dr Taylor said the disease causes a number of recognisable symptoms such as fever, chills, a cough and shortness of breath. The symptoms are similar to those of pneumonia.

"The time from exposure to the onset of symptoms is typically between two and 10 days, so people who have the disease may already have noticed some of these symptoms or may develop them over the next week," she said.

Hunter New England Health urges anyone noticing these symptoms to contact their General Practitioner to rule out the possibility of having the disease.

"People are diagnosed through a throat swab, blood test or a urine test. Your GP will be able to determine through a simple examination whether there are significant symptoms in a patient to warrant further investigation," Dr Taylor said.

Treatment for Legionnaires' disease usually consists of a short hospitalisation or a course of antibiotics.

There have been six reported cases of Legionnaires' disease in the Newcastle and Hunter region for 2020, four of which were caused by the *Legionella longbeachae* bacteria through

soil or potting mix. There were 13 cases of Legionnaires' disease in total in 2019, seven of which were caused by *Legionella longbeachae* bacteria.

For further information on Legionnaires' disease, visit

https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/legionnaires_disease.aspx