Legionella Prevention & Public Health Protection

Protecting Public Health Together

BACKGROUND:

Private, regulated water providers are committed to protecting public health, including supporting efforts to reduce Legionnaires' disease. Our work is grounded in decades of experience and governed by the rigorous standards of the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Where Legionella Risk Occurs

PROBLEM:

EPA and CDC recognize that Legionella risk is driven more by indoor conditions than by drinking water. Public water treatment plants and distribution mains are typically not the primary sources of exposure.

According to EPA, "Legionella exposures primarily occur when a person breathes in spray or small droplets that contain the bacteria. A much less common route of exposure can occur when water droplets contaminated with Legionella get into the lungs accidentally when swallowing."

Based on EPA guidance, key facts about the most common Legionella exposure pathways include:

- Exposure primarily occurs through inhalation of aerosolized water, not by drinking water
- Aerosols are generated within building plumbing and water-using devices
- Risk increases under warm, stagnant or low-disinfectant conditions
- Large buildings with complex plumbing systems account for the majority of exposure pathways

Shared Roles in Legionella Prevention

SOLUTIONS:

Effective Legionella prevention depends on clear, complementary roles and responsibilities across the water continuum.

Private, regulated water providers protect public health by maintaining conditions that limit microbial growth up to the building connection, including:

- Meeting drinking water standards, including those for disinfectant residuals
- Maintaining system pressure and distribution system integrity
- Responding rapidly to main breaks and operational disruptions

Larger and more complex buildings play a critical role because Legionella risk is driven by management of indoor conditions, including:

- Managing hot and cold water temperatures
- Preventing water stagnation through regular use and flushing
- Maintaining plumbing fixtures and aerosol-producing devices
- Implementing building-appropriate water management practices

OUTCOMES:

- **High-quality, safe, and reliable water service**
- **Compliance that protects public health**
- **Superior operational performance**

References

U.S. EPA. Legionella in the Indoor Environment. https://www.epa.gov/indoor-air-quality-iaq/legionella-indoor-environment.

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U.S. CDC. Public Health Strategies for Legionella Control. https://www.cdc.gov/control-legionella/php/public-health-strategy/index.html.

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