

UW Health: University hospital addresses Legionnaires' cases

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MADISON – After identifying three formerly hospitalized patients and one inpatient who have developed Legionnaires' Disease (legionellosis), University Hospital is taking measures to address a suspected risk associated with the hospital's hot-water system.

Legionnaires', which is a type of pneumonia, is caused by bacteria that are typically present at low concentrations in tap water. University Hospital uses a water treatment system designed to keep levels low, but a recent adjustment to that system may have compromised its function. Tests on some units within the hospital recently have shown elevated levels.

When hospital officials learned that four patients had developed symptoms of Legionnaires', the patients were tested and all four tested positive on a urine test. All four of those tests were conducted in the past 10 days. Currently, the hospital is conducting tests to determine if the bacteria are related to the hospital water system.

The risk comes only from hot water in the form of airborne droplets, such as the water in a hot shower. Cold tap water poses no risk. Additionally, healthy patients who may inhale water droplets with the bacteria are at low risk. Those at higher risk are those over 50 and those with lung disease and/or compromised immune systems.

When the hospital became aware of the four patients with Legionnaires', officials

stopped all use of hospital showers. That is expected to continue until sometime early Thursday. This afternoon, the hospital will implement a “hyperchlorination” process to flush all hot-water lines in the building to eliminate any Legionella bacteria. The hospital has also notified affected patients and staff of the situation.

The hospital monitors water routinely and whenever a patient is suspected to have Legionnaires’. There have been no cases of Legionella acquired at University Hospital in 23 years.

American Family Children’s Hospital is not affected.

Two of the four patients have been discharged from the hospital; the other two remain hospitalized. At this time no additional cases of Legionnaires’ have been identified.

The Wisconsin state Division of Public Health has also been notified and will be kept apprised as additional information comes forward.