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County Health Officials Offer Guidance for Reopening Buildings to Reduce the Risk of Legionella Exposure

Prolonged closure or reduced operations of a building pose a health risk if water and air conditioning systems are not properly managed and restored for returning occupants

STOCKTON, CA (July 9, 2020) – As a result of California’s Stay-at-Home Order, many buildings and businesses in San Joaquin County (SJC) have been closed to the public or have limited access in order to help slow the spread of COVID-19. Recently, certain restrictions have been lifted in San Joaquin County that allow specific business sectors and facilities to reopen. As part of a safe and effective reopening process, health officials from San Joaquin County Public Health Services (PHS) and San Joaquin County Environmental Health Department (EHD) urge property and business owners to thoroughly flush and inspect their water and air conditioning systems to avoid creating another potentially deadly health hazard – Legionnaires’ disease. Guidance on how to do this is available from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/building-water-system.html>.

About Legionella

Wayne Fox, Interm Director of the San Joaquin County Environmental Health Department says, “COVID-19 is one threat but when a building has been sitting unused – there are other concerns in the ventilation system and plumbing system that need to be addressed such as *Legionella*.” Legionnaires’ disease is a serious, sometimes fatal type of lung infection, or pneumonia, caused by *Legionella* bacteria. *Legionella* is a naturally occurring bacteria in fresh water that can be harmful when it grows in plumbing or air conditioning systems. These man-made water sources become a health problem when small droplets of water or mist that contain the bacteria get into the air and people breathe them in.

When water is stagnant, hot water temperatures can decrease to *Legionella* growth range. Standing water can also lead to low or undetectable levels of disinfectant, such as chlorine. To prevent *Legionella* growth and other pathogen and corrosion concerns, these systems must be actively managed and maintained. If bacteria grow during low use periods, building users have a higher risk of contracting disease when full use resumes.

In general, people do not spread Legionnaires’ disease to other people. Legionnaires’ disease is a respiratory illness with symptoms very similar to COVID-19 and pneumonia that include a cough, shortness of breath, fever, muscle aches, and headaches. Symptoms usually begin two (2) to ten (10) days after being exposed to the bacteria.

Persons at increased risk for developing Legionnaires’ disease include: adults 50 years or older; current or former smokers; people with chronic lung disease, cancer or other underlying conditions like diabetes, kidney failure and liver failure; and people with a weakened immune system caused by diseases or medicines.

Resources and Recommendations for Property and Business Owners and Managers

Business owners should take the necessary steps in order to protect the health and safety of occupants. PHS and EHD officials recommend that businesses follow the newly published standards from CDC to reduce the rise of waterborne illness as operations resume. To help avoid an increase in Legionnaires' disease as facilities reopen, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has updated their online **Guidance for Reopening Buildings After Prolonged Shutdown or Reduced Operation**, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/building-water-system.html>.

The comprehensive guidance includes details of recommended actions and resources, and outlines the eight (8) steps to take for reopening a building:

1. Develop a comprehensive water management program for the water system and all devices that use water in each building.
2. Ensure water heaters are properly maintained and temperature is correctly set.
3. Flush the water system through all points of use, such as taps, floor drains, toilets, and showers, to replace all piped and stored water with fresher water with a residual disinfectant.
4. Clean and scrub all decorative water features like fountains to ensure they are free of slime or biofilm; refill with fresher water with a residual disinfectant.
5. Ensure hot tubs and spas are clean, well-maintained, and safe for use.
6. Ensure cooling towers are clean and well-maintained.
7. Ensure safety equipment, such as fire sprinklers, eye wash stations, and safety showers are clean, well-maintained, and safe for use.
8. Maintain building water systems such as by checking temperatures and residual disinfectant levels.

COVID-19 Recommendations Continue

Dr. Maggie Park, San Joaquin County Public Health Officer advises, "Even though some restrictions have been eased allowing certain businesses in San Joaquin County to start the process of reopening, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over and our numbers of COVID-19 related cases and deaths continue to increase. We cannot let our guard down. The Coronavirus will not go away on its own."

All of us must continue to: do our part to protect ourselves and each other; remain vigilant; and follow health official recommendations:

- **Remember to physically distance from people you do not live with by staying 6 feet away.**
- **Wear a cloth face cover if you go out in public.**
- **Continue to follow everyday prevention measures:**
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth.
 - Stay home when you are sick and consult your healthcare provider about getting tested.
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - Cover your cough or sneeze with a sleeve or with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash and wash your hands.
 - Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- **Stay home as much as possible, especially if you are a person at higher risk for severe illness.**

This pandemic continues to be a rapidly evolving situation. Find more information and resources for coronavirus on the PHS website at www.sjcphs.org. Follow us on social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) for updates. Additional COVID-19 related information, resources and guidance are found at the [California Department of Public Health website](http://www.cdph.ca), and the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website](http://www.cdc.gov).