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Legionnaires' Disease Sickens Two People in USVI, One Hospitalized; CDC Heads to Territory to Assist

Health / **Published On February 08, 2022 04:40 AM /**

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Medical illustration showing bacterial microbe or bacterium inside rod. By. 123RF

Specialists from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were on their way to the U.S. Virgin Islands to assist the V.I. Dept. of Health with testing, as D.O.H. works to prevent spread of Legionnaires' disease — a potentially deadly pneumonia caused by breathing in tiny droplets of water containing Legionella bacteria which was recently detected in the USVI.

D.O.H. said during Monday's press briefing held by the Bryan administration that two people were sickened by the disease, one in St. Thomas and another on St. Croix. In a brief interview with the Consortium Monday afternoon, Health Commissioner Justa Encarnacion said one of those individuals was hospitalized as a result of the infection. She declined to provide more details,

citing patient privacy concerns. The commissioner explained that because only two individuals were sickened, D.O.H. has been cautious about the amount of information it releases.

"You know that when you start to distinct and answer questions when it's two [people], then you know that information can leak out," she said. "We have to be very cautious, so I can tell that one of them was hospitalized, but that's as much as I can say to protect the privacy of [both] of them," Ms. Encarnacion said.

Asked whether she was concerned about the spread of Legionnaires' disease in the territory, the commissioner said no, pointing out that the disease is usually isolated. "Because it's usually isolated cases, you can locate where the incident occurred and take action at that site," Ms. Encarnacion said, pointing to a conversation she had with D.O.H. Infectious Disease Specialist Dr. Tai Hunte-Ceasar. "So that's really what we're doing."

Ms. Encarnacion further stated that CDC specialists were on their way to the territory to assist the health department with testing. "We contacted the CDC, they're coming down, they should be here already," the commissioner said, adding that she couldn't validate whether the specialists had arrived as of Monday afternoon because of bad weather affecting some parts of the U.S. mainland, leading to travel delays.

The CDC is coming to assist with "any testing that needs to be done, and so far it's only two." The commissioner added that while there hasn't been any indication of additional cases, "it's always best to be cautious, and that's why we put the [press release](#) out, so that people know that it is important to take care of their cisterns," she said, giving an example of areas where Legionnaires' disease can grow and multiple.

The commissioner pointed to a release D.O.H. issued in February 2020 revealing that 4 out of 5 cisterns in the territory had [tested positive for E. coli](#), which D.O.H. said was an indicator of human or animal feces contamination.

"So it's not something that is new, but it's a good reminder of what we need to do to keep our pools, spas — those areas where water is heated — [clean]," the health commissioner concluded.

According to the CDC, after Legionella grows and multiplies in a building water system, water containing Legionella can spread in droplets small enough for people to breathe in. People can get Legionnaires' disease or Pontiac fever when they breathe in small droplets of water in the air that contain the bacteria.

Less commonly, people can get sick by aspiration of drinking water containing Legionella. This happens when water accidentally goes into the lungs while drinking. People at increased risk of aspiration include those with swallowing difficulties, the CDC explained.

In general, people do not spread Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever to other people. However, this may be possible under rare circumstances, according to the federal health authority.