Call for Enhanced Surveillance and Testing for Legionellosis in Passaic County and Bergen County

Date: July 21, 2023

Public Health Message Type: ☐ Alert ☒ Advisory ☐ Update ☐ Information

Intended Audience: ☒ All public health partners ☒ Healthcare providers ☒ Infection preventionists ☒ Local health departments ☐ Schools/child care centers ☐ ACOs ☐ Animal health professionals ☐ Other:

Key Points or Updates:

- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) is seeing an increase in the number of Legionnaires' disease cases being reported in a geographic area which borders Passaic County and Bergen County.
- Healthcare providers are being asked to have a high index of suspicion for *Legionella* when evaluating patients for community-acquired and healthcare-associated pneumonia, particularly if SARS-CoV-2 testing is negative.
- **NJDOH is requesting that lower respiratory specimens are collected and held for patients who test positive for *Legionella* by a urinary antigen test and who reside/work in or visited Passaic County or Bergen County.**
- All suspected or confirmed cases of legionellosis (Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever) should be promptly reported to the local health department where the patient resides. If the patient residence is unknown, report to your own local health department. Contact information is available at: localhealth.nj.gov.

<u>INFORMATION FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS, FACILITIES, AND CLINICAL LABORATORIES</u>

Healthcare providers should consider the diagnosis of Legionnaires' disease in patients presenting with clinical features of pneumonia, fever, and cough. NJDOH requests that lower respiratory specimens (sputum, bronchoalveolar lavage, tracheal aspirate, or lung tissue) are collected and held for patients who tested positive for *Legionella* by a urinary antigen test and who reside/work in or visited Passaic County or Bergen County.

- These respiratory specimens should ideally be obtained prior to antibiotic administration, but antibiotic treatment should not be delayed to facilitate this process (and culture can be attempted even after antibiotic therapy has been initiated).
- Respiratory specimens should be frozen immediately after collection at ≤-20°C.
- Please inform your laboratory to not reject respiratory specimens based on specimen quality (e.g., due to lack of white blood cells in the sample, contamination with other bacteria).

Please notify NJDOH at PreventLD@doh.nj.gov if a lower respiratory specimen is available from a patient with a positive *Legionella* urinary antigen test, or if a *Legionella* isolate has already been recovered. After further public health investigation, NJDOH may request that these specimens are sent to a public health laboratory for *Legionella* culture and/or molecular sequencing free-of-charge.

Diagnostic Testing

The *Legionella* urinary antigen test is the most widely available rapid method of diagnosis and detects *Legionella pneumophila* serogroup 1. A negative urinary antigen test, however, does not rule out infection from other *Legionella* species and serotypes.

Culture of *Legionella* from a lower respiratory specimen (e.g., sputum, tracheal aspirate, or bronchoalveolar lavage fluid) should be used in conjunction with rapid nonculture diagnostics like the *Legionella* urinary antigen test. Culture methods are be used to identify all *Legionella* species and serogroups that may cause infection. Culture also has the added benefit of producing isolates that can be further analyzed using molecular techniques. Molecular techniques can be used to compare clinical isolates to environmental isolates in order to confirm an outbreak source. The urinary antigen test alone does not allow for molecular comparison of isolates.

Reporting

Health care providers and administrators are required to report cases of legionellosis (Legionnaires' disease and Pontiac fever) to the local health department where the patient resides within 24 hours of diagnosis (N.J.A.C. 8:57 – 1.4). If the patient residence is unknown, report to your own local health department. Contact information is available at: localhealth.nj.gov.

Timely identification and reporting of legionellosis cases is important, as this allows public health officials to quickly identify and stop potential clusters and outbreaks by linking new cases to previously reported ones. When investigating cases of Legionnaires' disease, Local Health Departments should inquire about travel to Passaic County and Bergen County, including addresses of locations visited and respective dates.

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