



Safe Handling of Potting Mixes, Mulches, Garden Soils and Composts (Preventing Legionella Infection)

Potting mixes, mulches, composts and soils can be harmful to your health if you do not take some simple precautions.

A group of organisms, called *Legionella*, is found in these materials and can cause serious illness. *Legionella longbeachae* is one species known to cause a type of pneumonia in humans. The information contained in this pamphlet will help you to avoid the disease.

SYMPTOMS OF *LEGIONELLA* INFECTION?

Legionella infection usually develops 2 to 10 days after exposure and some or all of the following symptoms may be experienced:

- fever
- chills
- a cough which may be dry or may produce sputum
- aching muscles
- headache
- tiredness
- loss of appetite
- diarrhoea

It is difficult to distinguish *Legionella* infection from other types of pneumonia by symptoms alone and other medical tests are required to diagnose the disease.

HOW TO AVOID *LEGIONELLA* INFECTION?

Due to the widespread use of potting mixes, mulches, soils and other garden products, many people are potentially exposed to the organism. To help prevent infection, these simple precautions should be followed when handling such materials:

- Always wear gloves
- Keep the mix damp while in use
- Avoid inhaling the mix
- Wash your hands thoroughly after use

HOW SERIOUS IS *LEGIONELLA* INFECTION?

Legionellosis is a serious disease and is associated with a mortality rate of around 15%. It is a relatively simple infection to cure providing it is diagnosed and treated promptly. The extent of illness may be relatively minor, particularly if appropriate treatment is commenced at an early

stage. However, the effects are dependent upon age, health and the severity of the infection. Consequently the length of time taken to recover can vary greatly.

HOW IS THE *LEGIONELLA* ORGANISM SPREAD?

Studies in South Australia have shown that the most likely route of transmission of *Legionella longbeachae* is from hand to mouth. It is also possible that *Legionella* infection may be contracted by breathing in fine particles of dust or water carrying the organism but this is not proven.

Unlike other micro-organisms *Legionella* infection cannot be caught from another person or from animals.

WHO GETS *LEGIONELLA* INFECTION?

People of any age may be infected. However, the disease is opportunistic. It is more common in middle aged and older persons and those whose immune system is weak. There is an increased risk of acquiring this disease if you smoke or have a chronic health condition such as emphysema, diabetes, HIV, or if you are on steroid or other immunosuppressive medication.

L. longbeachae infection is not limited to gardeners but the use of potting mixes, composts and other soils put them at greater risk.

CAN I BE INFECTED BY *LEGIONELLA* MORE THAN ONCE?

Tests show that your body is able to develop immunity against a second infection but how long immunity lasts is unknown. It is, therefore, important to take care at all times.

CAN THE GROWTH OF *LEGIONELLA* ORGANISMS BE PREVENTED?

Legionella micro-organisms occur naturally and are widespread in the environment. There is no known way of preventing *L. longbeachae* from multiplying in composted bark, saw dusts, plant and vegetable materials, or other finished potting mixes and garden soils.

When working in your garden, remember ...

- Always wear gloves
- Keep the mix damp while in use
- Avoid inhaling the mix
- Wash your hands thoroughly after use

FURTHER INFORMATION

Contact your:

Local Government Environmental Health Officer

or

Regional Public Health Unit

or

Applied Environmental Health Service

Environmental Health Service

PO Box 8172

PERTH BUSINESS CENTRE WA 6849

Telephone: (08) 9388 4999

Facsimile: (08) 9388 4955

<http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au>