

COVID-19: Legionella Risk from Unused Water Systems

Legionella bacteria can cause respiratory illnesses, including 'Legionnaires' disease', a fatal form of pneumonia. With some businesses closed or with reduced work activity as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is an increased risk of legionella growing within water systems.

If you are a business owner, a landlord or property manager, or otherwise manage a water system, you need to be aware of the risks of legionella growing within stagnant water systems.

All water systems need to be monitored, but the main risks are systems or equipment which may involve a risk of aerosol i.e. where there are showers, hose pipes, sprinklers, washers, irrigation systems, spas, cooling towers, evaporative condensers etc.

As a general principle, outlets on hot and cold-water systems, should be used at least once a week to maintain a degree of water flow that will minimise the chances of stagnation and potential growth of legionella.

To manage the risks whilst the water system is not being used or used infrequently, you should consider implementing a suitable flushing regime or other measures such as draining the system if it is to remain vacant for long periods, before the system is used.

Flushing of the water system should be done gently, at low water pressure, to minimise aerosols:

- If necessary, first pre-heat your hot water supply.
- For mixer taps, gently run cold water taps first, then hot. Turn cold tap on at arms' length whilst facing away, then move away and let the tap run for 2 minutes.
- After turning off the cold tap, gently run the hot water tap for 2 minutes in the same way.
- After this, put a thermometer under the water flow to ensure the hot water temperature reached at least 60C. If not, adjust the hot water temperature on your boiler, wait for it to heat up and repeat this.
- For shower heads, hoses or pressure washer taps, cover the head to reduce the spray by tying a polythene bag over it that has a small hole cut at the bottom. Always turn the head away from you and turn on with low pressure, initially just cold water for 2 minutes, then hot for 2 minutes. Remove the polythene bag and check the water temperature reached at least 60C. If not, adjust the boiler and repeat as above.

Before use (after a prolonged period of closure) the whole water system should be disinfected, following the guidance produced by the [European Society for Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Disease on managing Legionella in building water systems](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For swimming pools, sports centres or spas, see the [**Pool Water Treatment Advisory Group Code of Practice**](#) and their [**advice on temporary pool closures**](#).

Further guidance on legionella is also available on our web page <https://www.dover.gov.uk/Environment/Environmental-Health/Water/Water.aspx>