

Legionnaires' disease - Checklist for gardeners

Compost, potting mix, mulches and composted green waste can be a source of community-acquired pneumonia due to [Legionnaires' disease](#). *Legionella longbeachae*, an unusual form of the *Legionella* bacteria which causes Legionnaires' disease, can be found in potting compost and other garden products, particularly in warm countries such as Australia and New Zealand but recently outbreaks have occurred in Scotland during unusually warm weather.

Gardeners should bear in mind that compost and other soils can contain a large amount of bacteria/bugs. While the risk of becoming unwell through these gardening activities remains very low; growth of bacteria/bugs can increase in potting compost during warm weather. The increase in bacteria leads to an increase in the chances of getting infected. A gardener can be infected by breathing in the bacteria through contaminated (dirty) dust or by dirty hands.

Checklist for gardeners:

- Store the potting compost in a cool place away from the sun to limit the growth of bacteria.
- Always follow the manufacturer's safety instructions on the compost bag.
- Use a disposable dust mask to avoid breathing in dusts (particularly if working indoors),
- Wear gloves and wash your hands immediately after working with compost/potting mix (as well as wearing the gloves).
- Wear eye protection such as good quality sunglasses or goggles/safety glasses.
- Open compost bags at arm's length, using a safety blade or sharp knife, in a well ventilated area/ ideally outdoors.
- Do not shake or stir the compost bag before opening it as this will produce dust particles which may breathe in. Dampen contents of the bag carefully before use by spraying water into the bag; do this by making a small hole in the bag and inserting a garden hose to dampen potting mix/compost to avoid creating dust.
- During use: keep doors open in greenhouses or sheds when potting plants or filling hanging baskets or do the work outside.
- Clean up: by sweeping whilst damp to reduce dust spreading. Wash your hands immediately after use of the potting compost.
- Avoid: eating, drinking or smoking while gardening or handling compost unless your hands are thoroughly washed beforehand. Do not re-use gardening clothes, wash them after using compost.

Other sources of *Legionella* infection in the garden include; dripping hanging baskets, pressure hoses, sprinklers, fountains, bark mulch.