Okehampton Town Council

ALLOTMENT TENANT GUIDANCE

Gardening Safely on Your Allotment

Simple habits to reduce the risk from Legionella

What is Legionella?

Legionella bacteria occur **naturally** in compost, soil, rainwater and river water. If breathed in as fine dust or spray, they can cause **Legionnaires' disease**, a type of pneumonia. Most people who are exposed will not become ill, and the risk on an allotment is easily reduced with a few simple habits.

Who is more at risk?

Older people, **smokers** and anyone with a **weakened immune system** or underlying health condition are more vulnerable. The same simple precautions protect everyone who spends time on your plot.

The main risk is **breathing in dust and spray**, so keep both away from your face.

PART 1 Compost

WHAT'S THE RISK?

One type of Legionella, **Legionella longbeachae**, lives naturally in compost and potting mixes. It is most commonly linked to **bagged compost**, but can also be present in **home compost**.

WHY IT MATTERS

Opening a bag or turning a heap releases a **fine dust**, and it's that dust, breathed in, that can carry the bacteria into the lungs.

> *Think of a bag of flour. Tip it carelessly and a small cloud rises straight towards your face.*



Hold the bag low and open it **away from your face**, outdoors.



Leaning over the bag puts your face **directly in the dust**.

WHAT TO DO

1

Open bags carefully

Away from your face, and **outdoors** rather than inside a greenhouse.

2

Keep compost damp

Moisten dry compost before use to **reduce the dust** released when handling it.

3

Wash your hands

At the first opportunity, and avoid touching your face, **eating, drinking or smoking** until then.

Continued overleaf

PART 2

Water Butts and Hoses

WHAT'S THE RISK?

Legionella is present at low levels in most natural water, including **rainwater**. Water that sits for long periods, in a **water butt** or a **hose** left full, gives the bacteria the chance to multiply, especially in a hose left lying in the sun.

WHY IT MATTERS

Research by Public Health England detected Legionella in **107 of 113** garden water butts tested, yet none was detected in the air when the water was **poured from a watering can**. A hose on a fine spray setting did release it into the air.

> *Rainwater is still worth using. The key is to pour it, not spray it.*



A watering can gives **heavy drops** that fall straight to the soil.



A fine spray creates a **mist that hangs in the air** and can be breathed in.

WHAT TO DO

1

Avoid fine spray

Use a **watering can** or a hose on a gentle flow, avoiding sprayers and misting nozzles.

2

Keep butts covered

Keep **lids fitted** to reduce debris getting into the stored water.

3

Drain hoses after use

Empty hoses once finished and **store them out of direct sun**.

Using irrigation or misting in your greenhouse?

Favour **drip or soaker-hose systems** over misting and sprinklers. Avoid using stored rainwater in misting or sprinkler systems during **warm weather**, and **flush systems through** after they have stood unused.

Your plot, your part

Compost, water butts, hoses and any irrigation on your plot are **your responsibility** to manage. Composting and rainwater harvesting are good for your allotment, and these habits help you enjoy both safely. Keep this sheet handy and share it with anyone who helps on your plot.

Questions?

Okehampton Town Council: 01837 53179 | allotments@okehampton.gov.uk

Date issued

25 September 2026