

Mycobacterium chimaera infection

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What is Mycobacterium chimaera?

Mycobacterium chimaera is one of a group of common bacteria that sometimes cause lung infections or severe illness in people with weakened immune systems. These bacteria are commonly found in the environment from sources such as soil and water, including tap water.

Canadian hospitals are aware of the risk of Mycobacterium chimaera infection associated with heater-cooler units (HCUs), however, the chances of getting this infection after heart surgery, heart transplant or lung transplant surgery are very low.

Is the infection caused by Mycobacterium chimaera serious?

Mycobacterium chimaera is usually not harmful to people. Only rarely does it cause infections in people with weakened immune systems.

What are the chances that I have or will get this infection?

The chances of getting this infection during surgery are very low. A risk of bacterial infection at the surgical site is always possible during surgery. For most people, the benefits of having surgery outweigh the risk of infection and symptoms may show 3 months to 5 years after surgery.

What are the symptoms of an infection caused by Mycobacterium chimaera?

Initial symptoms of an infection caused by Mycobacterium chimaera may include:

- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Weight loss
- Shortness of breath
- Unexplained fever or chills

When it comes to infants, signs and symptoms of Mycobacterium chimaera infection includes fever and failure to thrive. To learn more, visit [Mycobacterium chimaera infections in post-operative patients](#).

Signs of this infection are similar to many other common infections, so if you are feeling ill, it might not be from Mycobacterium chimaera. See your doctor if you experience a combination of these signs lasting longer than a few days.

Call HealthLink BC at [8-1-1](#) to speak to a registered nurse any time of the day or night to ask about your symptoms and for advice on when to see a doctor. If you are having severe signs, contact your doctor right away or go to the nearest emergency.

How soon would I know if I have this infection?

The Mycobacterium chimaera bacteria grows very slowly. Symptoms of an infection could appear from

several months after or even up to 5 years after heart surgery, heart transplant or lung transplant surgery.

What should I do if I have symptoms of infection?

See your doctor if you have symptoms of infection for more than a few days. If you have severe signs, contact your doctor right away or go to the nearest emergency room. You may also call HealthLink BC at [8-1-1](tel:8-1-1) to speak to a registered nurse any time of the day or night. A nurse can help you determine if your symptoms are severe and provide advice on when to see a doctor or visit the emergency room.

How is the infection treated?

Mycobacterium chimaera infection is treated with antibiotics.

Should everyone who had heart surgery, heart transplant or lung transplant surgery receive antibiotics just in case?

No, this is not recommended. Taking antibiotics when you do not need them can cause antibiotics to lose their ability to control or kill certain bacteria over time. If this happens and you get an infection in the future, antibiotics might not work to treat it.

Can I be tested to find out if I am infected with Mycobacterium chimaera?

No, there is no screening test to see if you have been exposed to Mycobacterium chimaera during heart surgery, heart transplant or lung transplant surgery. These bacteria grow slowly and are not detected without physical symptoms of infection. If you do not have any symptoms of infection, testing is not needed.

Is Mycobacterium chimaera contagious?

No, this infection cannot be spread from person to person.

I am concerned with the care I received during surgery. What should I do?

To discuss concerns with your care or to make a formal care quality complaint, please contact the Patient Care Quality Office for the health authority where you had your surgery. You can find the office for the health authority where you had surgery using our [HealthLink BC Directory](#).

Find more resources and supports

If you have more questions or concerns, please call HealthLink BC at [8-1-1](tel:8-1-1). HealthLink BC is available any time of the day or night in over 130 languages. You can also receive information on free counselling services available to patients and families.

The information provided in the Mycobacterium chimaera health feature has been adapted from the December 2016 notification letter Cardiac Services BC provided to patients who have had heart or lung transplant surgery in BC between January 1, 2011 and December 11, 2016.

For more HealthLinkBC File topics, visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca/more/resources/healthlink-bc-files or your local public health unit. For non-emergency health information and advice in B.C. visit www.HealthLinkBC.ca or call [8-1-1](tel:8-1-1) (toll-free). For the deaf and hard of hearing, call [7-1-1](tel:7-1-1). Translation services are available in more than 130 languages on request.