

One, possibly two, cases of Elizabethkingia infection in Jefferson County

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JEFFERSON — Jefferson is among 11 Wisconsin counties that have reported cases of a bacterial bloodstream infection that has been linked to 18 deaths statewide.

Jefferson County Health Department Director Gail Scott said Saturday that one, possibly two, local residents are among 44 people in southern and southeastern Wisconsin who have tested positive for the Elizabethkingia infection.

All of the infected persons have serious underlying health conditions, according to state health officer Karen McKeown. The majority of those sickened are over age 65 and none are children.

“We were notified that we have a case or possibly two,” Scott said. “So the official word is that, yes, Jefferson County is one of the counties that has a person diagnosed with Elizabethkingia. That being said, we are not directly involved with follow-up.”

That is being done by the state Department of Health Services, Division of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Symptoms include fever, shortness of breath, chills or skin rash, health officials said.

“It is not known to be passed person-to-person. It is an acquired infection and they are looking for the source or sources,” Scott said of Elizabethkingia. “We have been in touch with our providers, but as of right now, I have no confirmation as to where the person (or persons) was treated.”

She added that the county health agency’s role right now is to be in “awareness mode.”

“We are also ready to assist in any investigations as needed,” Scott said.

In addition to Jefferson County, case patients reside in Columbia, Dane, Dodge, Fond du Lac, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Sauk, Washington and Waukesha counties.

The CDC sent five employees to Wisconsin to help the Department of Health Services pinpoint a link to those that have been infected by Elizabethkingia. At this point, the source of the infection remains elusive.

Interviews with those infected were being done by CDC and state investigators. Family members of those who died also were interviewed.

“Even as they’re grieving, they are providing information to help,” McKeown said.

State health officials were first notified of six cases between Dec. 29, 2015, and Jan. 4, 2016, and alerted healthcare providers and laboratories statewide of the presence of the bacteria. After the initial cases were reported and state health officials notified local partners, the number of cases began to grow steadily with one dating back to November 2015.

“We’ve seen an uptick because people are specifically looking for this,” McKeown said.

Illness associated with Elizabethkingia typically affects people with compromised immune systems or serious underlying health conditions.

The CDC said that although Elizabethkingia is a common organism in the environment, including water and soil, it rarely causes infections. A variety of potential sources, including healthcare products, water sources and the environment, were being tested, the CDC said, but none of these have been found to be a source of the bacteria.

Melissa Brower, a spokeswoman with the CDC, said that in general, each state sees about five to 10 cases of the bacteria per year. A number of small, localized outbreaks also have been reported.

Scott said more information about the illness is available by visiting <https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/disease/elizabethkingia.htm>.