

February 2018

Dear [patient name]

IMPORTANT INFORMATION REGARDING YOUR PREVIOUS CARDIAC SURGERY

We are writing to you because you have had heart bypass surgery at [hospital] within the past five years, during which a heater-cooler device was used to control your body temperature during the operation.

We have become aware that a certain model of these heater-cooler devices has been linked internationally to infection caused by bacteria called *Mycobacterium chimaera*, this bacteria is commonly found in soil and water. This model was used at [hospital], and this letter is to inform you of this and provide advice in the unlikely event that you become unwell.

While we understand that you will be concerned by this, please be reassured there is only a very small chance (about 1 in 5,000) that you have been infected.

The bacteria rarely cause infections in healthy people, but people with weakened immune systems (including some cardiac patients) are more susceptible to becoming ill through exposure to these bacteria. There is no risk to your family or friends, or to the general public.

This is an international issue; so far one case has been found in New Zealand and has been successfully treated.

If you are experiencing any of the following symptoms please see your primary health care provider or GP as soon as possible with this letter.

- Unexplained fevers or night sweats
- Unexplained weight loss
- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Pain in the chest, and/or redness or pus around the site of surgery
- Increased shortness of breath
- Joint or muscle pain
- Nausea, vomiting or abdominal pain

We are also working closely with Healthline and you can call them for advice on 0800 611 116. Healthline has interpreters available 24/7.

These symptoms may take months or years to develop, so please keep this letter handy in case you need to see your primary health care provider or GP about this issue in the future. We have separately notified all GPs and [other providers].

We understand that receiving this letter may be stressful for you or your family. Please be reassured the chance of you becoming ill is very small, but it is important you are well informed, and contact your GP if you have any of the symptoms above.

Yours sincerely

Frequently asked questions

What is *Mycobacterium chimaera*?

- *Mycobacterium chimaera* bacteria is commonly found in the environment, including in soil and water. It very rarely causes infections in healthy people.
- Patients with weakened immune systems due to other medical conditions or those with implanted medical devices, such as artificial heart valves, are more susceptible to infection if exposed to this bacterium.

How can a cardiac surgery patient become infected?

- Across the world, this bacteria has been found in the water tanks of a particular model of heater-cooler devices used in heart surgery. These devices are used to keep your body at the right temperature during surgery.
- In a very small number of cases the bacteria has caused an infection in the person having surgery.
- *Mycobacterium chimaera* infection cannot be spread from person-to-person.

What is the risk of my being infected?

- As you would have been advised by your surgical team, there is always a risk of infection associated with any cardiac surgery. Infections, including with *Mycobacterium chimaera*, can occur many months or even several years after surgery.
- The number of cardiac surgery patients infected is thought to be very low (about 1 in every 5,000 or 0.02%). So far one case has been found in New Zealand and was successfully treated.

What are the signs to look for?

- *Mycobacterium chimaera* is a slow growing bacterium that can be difficult to diagnose in patients as symptoms may only develop months to years after the patient's cardiac surgery.
- Symptoms of any infection include:
 - Unexplained fevers or night sweats
 - Unexplained weight loss
 - Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
 - Pain in the chest, and/or redness or pus around the site of surgery
 - Increased shortness of breath
 - Joint or muscle pain
 - Nausea, vomiting or abdominal pain

What should I do if I think I may have been infected?

- If you are experiencing any one or more of these symptoms please see your primary health care provider / GP as soon as possible with this letter.
- Please keep this letter handy in case you need to see your primary health care provider / GP about this issue in the future.
- You can also call Healthline for advice on 0800 611 116.

If I have an infection, how would this be treated?

- If an infection is confirmed, your clinical team will discuss treatment options with you which may include the use of antibiotics and / or further surgery.
- So far one case has been found in New Zealand and was successfully treated.

What has been done to prevent this issue?

- We are working hard to ensure that this issue is prevented in the future.
- Our Heater-cooler devices have been checked and have either been cleaned or replaced as needed. A rigorous system is in place to ensure future patients are not exposed to the bacteria.
- This is a known international issue, not restricted to New Zealand, and we are sharing information with clinicians in other countries.

Who can I talk to for further information about this letter?

- Your primary health care provider or GP has been notified about this issue.
- We are working closely with Healthline, and they can provide telephone advice on this issue on 0800 611 116.
- Healthline has interpreters available 24/7.

What you need to know now

- There is only a very small chance (about 1 in 5,000) that you have been infected.
- There is no risk to your family or friends, or to the general public.
- If you are experiencing any of the following symptoms please see your primary health care provider or GP as soon as possible with this letter.
 - Unexplained fevers or night sweats
 - Unexplained weight loss
 - Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
 - Pain in the chest, and/or redness or pus around the site of surgery
 - Increased shortness of breath
 - Joint or muscle pain
 - Nausea, vomiting or abdominal pain
- Keep this letter handy in case you need to see your primary health care provider or GP about this issue in the future.
- If you have concerns you can also call Healthline on 0800 611 116.