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Growth of *Legionella* during COVID-19 lockdown stagnation

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While “avoiding stagnation” has been the mantra of many building water quality experts, the foundational support for how this terminology is used in peer-reviewed publications and building water management guidelines is not overly convincing. With COVID-19 lockdowns and subsequent reopening, the concern that extended stagnation will trigger increased incidence (or even an epidemic) of legionellosis has been widely raised in the news and social media. Here, we provide a perspective on four simple questions to a complex topic, with hope that it encourages a broader dialogue and more critical assessment of assumptions and communication strategies surrounding stagnation and *Legionella* growth.

Water impact

The decades-old dogma that “stagnation causes *Legionella* growth” has been widely disseminated after COVID-19 lockdowns became prevalent. We argue this “fact” has been over-simplified to a singular concept and is not unilaterally supported in peer-reviewed literature. This review highlights nuances surrounding stagnation in buildings and suggests criteria to carefully consider how results are communicated to practitioners for forthcoming post-COVID-19 building water quality studies being conducted worldwide.

Introduction

It is a widely accepted “fact” that water stagnation in buildings leads to *Legionella* growth.^{1–7} This has been amplified considerably following the COVID-19 building shutdowns worldwide, with calls for some intensive actions to be undertaken by building managers (flushing protocols^{3,8,9}) being translated to warnings of potentially severe health risks.^{10–13} Optimizing hydraulic design and thus maintaining target controls within building networks is clearly beneficial to controlling microbial water quality.^{14,15} However, the available scientific evidence regarding the impact of stagnation on *Legionella* growth is more complicated and less convincing than what is frequently conveyed in peer-reviewed literature, *Legionella* control guidelines, news media, and social media. Here, we provide opinion on four fundamental questions related to the impact of stagnation during the COVID-19 lockdown through an assessment of some of the influential literature in the field and identify criteria to be addressed when conducting and reporting on post-COVID-19 *Legionella* studies. A more careful approach in documenting the impacts of stagnation on legionellosis (Legionnaires’ disease and the more understudied and under-reported Pontiac fever) is needed to put

health risks of *Legionella* occurrence into context with other problems that can develop during stagnation, or unintended consequences (e.g., improper flushing causing release of contaminants).

(1) What is stagnation?

Stagnation of water in building plumbing systems coincides with physiochemical water quality changes that alter the trajectory of microbial dynamics in water systems. These changes include water temperatures trending towards and remaining at ambient temperature, decay of disinfection residual (where applicable), destabilization of corrosion scales¹⁶ and biofilms,¹⁷ release of metals such as copper and lead,¹⁸ and changes in the composition and concentration of bio-available nutrients.^{19,20} However, part of the confusion and potential for miscommunication regarding the effects of stagnation on water quality is how stagnation is defined. In the context of controlling *Legionella* growth, the term stagnation has been used to describe complete stagnation (no water exchange or flow) in unused water storage tanks¹ or outlets,²¹ intermittent demand at individual outlets,¹ existence of dead-end pipes,²² generally elevated water age due to low demand and/or over-sized components,²³ and no water exchange in the presence of continuous water movement due to water recirculation.²¹ The duration of stagnation studied also changes considerably in context of the system, encompassing periods of one night,¹⁷ days,²⁴

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evidence of growth during lockdown or evidence of increased risk of contracting legionellosis.

(1) Does the study adequately demonstrate COVID-19 stagnation caused the occurrence/growth of *Legionella* by providing appropriate baseline data? Data collected prior to the start of lockdown is ideal. Tracking performance of a building during recommissioning is an alternative, but does not necessarily indicate pandemic-related issues. Single time-point snap shot data of just one building is not meaningful, while snap shot data of many buildings should be placed into context with past surveys indicating wide-spread colonization of *Legionella*.^{42–44}

(2) Does the study adequately describe background water demand during lockdown relative to historical norms in addition to the specific stagnation period for outlets tested (*i.e.*, complete stagnation *vs.* low occupancy)? Quantitatively assessing overall water demand and use patterns within the building is ideal. Building occupancy (or surrogates for occupancy⁴⁵) may be helpful.

(3) Were any intensive flushing actions or other interventions taken during stagnation or prior to reopening? Various recommendations exist, and we expect a wide variety of preventative and remedial flushing and/or treatment practices to have occurred in response to COVID-19 lockdowns. Samples collected before and after flushing is clearly important, but inform on the efficacy of flushing, and not necessarily the impact of stagnation. These distinctions must be clearly handled in forthcoming publications and communications.

(4) Does the study adequately characterize plumbing, mechanical, and engineering aspects of the building? For example, the basic plumbing design (circulating systems *vs.* trunk and branch *vs.* manifold), number of outlets, water demand patterns, boiler system design (*e.g.*, volume, heat source, use of master mixing valves), materials, history of construction, and other pertinent building details help readers interpret the results and evaluate how the cause(s) of identified issues may relate to other examples. Often, detailed water quality and engineering aspects of building systems are not reported in peer-reviewed literature.

(5) Is the sampling strategy sensible and clearly described, and done in the context of the plumbing aspects described above? For example, are completely stagnating first draw samples compared to flushed samples, and hot water samples compared to cold water samples? Are data presented in context with the operational settings of the plumbing system (profiles of hot and cold water quality throughout the building)? For instance, Bédard and colleagues (2015)²⁴ present a sound approach to evaluating temperature; Rhoads and colleagues (2014)²³ present examples for evaluating residual disinfectant levels. Ambient building temperatures and HVAC operation also will likely play an important (and potentially unappreciated) role in microbial growth during stagnation.

(6) How does the study link or correlate *Legionella* occurrence to other relevant physical and chemical water

quality data? Measuring temperature, chlorine, inorganics, or other variables in samples collected sequentially with flushing, instead of splitting the volume of one sample for all analyses, can lead to misinterpretation of data.

(7) Does the study use culture methods to assess potential risk? Molecular methods are not typically used for risk assessments without long-term trends of detection. If molecular methods are used, does the study differentiate the genetic material of pathogenic species of *Legionella* (*e.g.*, *L. pneumophila*) or only at the genus level that may also contain non-pathogenic species of *Legionella*?

(8) Are culture results put into context with levels of concern? For non-healthcare buildings water systems that do not have high numbers of susceptible occupants, the recent National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine suggest 50 000 CFU L⁻¹ as an “action level” warranting serious concern and triggering remediation.⁷ Many international standards use 1000 CFU L⁻¹.⁴⁶

We recognize that many COVID-19-related experimental studies were started with limited time for detailed planning, and carried out under very challenging working conditions. Nonetheless, we argue that the more of these criteria can be considered and communicated, the easier it will be to draw sensible and universal conclusions from the results.

Conclusions

Water stagnation in building plumbing is complex. Investigation of legionellosis cases or *Legionella* occurrence requires detailed investigations that benefit from involving multiple disciplines. We recognize that stagnation clearly causes issues in some circumstances, but conclude that the highly variable conditions that can be observed during “stagnation” requires a more detailed definition and accounting of these conditions. Given the costs associated with reducing water system stagnation in buildings, a better understanding of these variables is needed to guide recommended practices. In the current COVID-19 situation, we urge a careful and considered communication approach, both in peer-reviewed publications and in communications with the broader public through news and social media. It is important that well-substantiated facts drive the dissemination of knowledge in this period. For the future, we strongly advocate for properly controlled studies and closer scrutiny of past literature to better understand *Legionella* colonization and growth during stagnation.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

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