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Reported Cases of Valley Fever Increase in San Joaquin County

(Stockton, CA – June 8, 2012) The increase in the number of reported cases of Valley Fever in San Joaquin County is a growing concern to local public health officials. San Joaquin County Public Health Services recorded 27 cases of Valley Fever in 2009, 46 in 2010, and 123 in 2011. Dr. Karen Furst, San Joaquin County Health Officer, stresses, "There is no reason for the public to be alarmed; but it is important to understand the cause and symptoms of this disease, and steps that can be taken to decrease risk of getting infected."

What is Valley Fever? The technical name for Valley Fever is Coccidioidomycosis, or "cocci" for short. The disease is caused by *Coccidioides immitis*, a fungus that lives in the soil primarily in the southwestern United States (i.e., Arizona, California, New Mexico and Nevada), and northwestern Mexico. People get exposed when the fungal spores become airborne and are inhaled into the lungs. These spores can get into the air when dirt is disturbed by humans or nature such as when digging, during construction, or from strong winds and dust clouds. In California the cocci fungus is predominantly found in the San Joaquin Valley, with the highest levels in the southern valley. For San Joaquin County, the highest rates are found in Tracy. Exposures are more common during the dry months of summer and fall, with most cases reported in the fall and early winter.

What are the symptoms? Approximately 60% of people infected with cocci do not develop any symptoms. The others develop symptoms about 1-3 weeks after getting exposed. The disease usually affects the lungs, causing symptoms of flu or pneumonia including extreme tiredness, fever, body aches, pains, cough, and rash. Most people's acute symptoms resolve in about a month, but full energy takes several months to return. In some people the disease spreads to other parts of the body such as the bones, skin, joints or brain. In these cases, the disease is very serious and may even cause death.

Who gets Valley Fever? Illness may occur in residents or visitors in an infected area. People most likely to be exposed are those working outside in dusty occupations, such as farm and construction workers and archaeologists, or others who breathe in dust from the dirt in areas where there are fungal spores. This may include exposures while gardening, off-road motor vehicle recreation, etc. Persons between the ages of 25 and 55 are most likely to develop symptoms of the disease - although people of all ages can have symptoms.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, groups at higher risk for severe disease include pregnant women, older persons and those with impaired immune systems (e.g. persons with diabetes, cancer, HIV, immunosuppressive medications, etc.). The rate of disseminated disease also appears to be higher in African Americans, Filipinos and possibly Hispanics. In most cases people who are exposed develop immunity.

How is Valley Fever diagnosed? Increased knowledge about the disease may lead to early diagnosis and treatment that could help prevent complications. A diagnosis is made either through a culture of the cocci organism from a person's body fluid or tissue specimen, or by a blood test that shows the body's immune response to the presence of the fungus in the body. Chest x-rays may also be used to detect changes in the lungs.

What is the treatment? For people with the flu-like symptoms of Valley Fever, doctors may treat the symptoms and recommend bedrest. For more severe disease a number of medications are now available. Occasionally surgery is recommended to remove a diseased portion of the lung, bone or skin.

How can Valley Fever be prevented? Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent Valley Fever. The infection is not spread from person to person or from animals to people. Persons at risk for Valley Fever should avoid exposure to dusty air in areas where the fungus is common. The risk for exposure to the cocci spores are highest during the dry months of the summer and fall. Those exposed to dust during their jobs or other outside activities should consider using respiratory protection, such as wearing a close fitting dust mask. Other measures include controlling dust, such as use of watering at construction sites. Early recognition of symptoms and seeking prompt medical care is important.

For more information:

San Joaquin County Public Health Services: www.sjcphs.org.

California Department of Public Health: www.cdph.ca.gov.

Attachments:

Data Sheets

Brochure, Cocci (Coccidioidomycosis) Valley Fever

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