

A Few Things You Need to Know About Valley Fever

By Paul Edgecomb, MD

Most people who live in the Valley of the Sun have heard of Valley Fever, but surprisingly few people, even lifelong residents, know much about it. Here are a few things everyone should know...

What is Valley Fever?

It's a fungus that lives in the soil in the desert areas of the southwestern U.S. and northern Mexico. It grows during the cooler, wetter springtime, then in the hot dry summer its spores get stirred up and float in the air, where they can be inhaled by people or animals.

How is it spread?

Valley Fever CANNOT be spread from person to person; it can only be acquired by inhaling the spores. The spores are most prevalent in the late summer. Most cases occur in people who are new to the

Valley -- within the first 5 years of living here. Most people are exposed to Valley Fever but the majority will develop immunity to it and have no ill effects; a few will become sick with it.

What does it do?

Once it gets into the body, it can cause numerous problems. Most people have little or no symptoms. Those who do become ill will most commonly experience pneumonia. Less commonly, patients may experience unusual skin rashes, bone infections or very rarely meningitis (infection of the brain).

How is it diagnosed?

There is a blood test for Valley Fever, but it's not as reliable a test as we'd like. Whenever there's a strong suspicion of Valley Fever, but the blood tests are negative, a Valley Fever specialist may be consulted to help make the diagnosis.

How is it treated?

Many mild or even moderate cases do not require any treatment at all. In the more severe cases, it will require long-term treatment with an anti-fungal pill; treatment can last anywhere from a few months to several years, depending on the severity.

What to watch for:

Most cases of pneumonia should be tested for Valley Fever. Also be suspicious of any fever that persists for more than a few days, or fatigue that persists for several weeks.

Interesting note:

Dogs and most farm animals can also get Valley Fever; however, cats are quite resistant to it.

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