

SAFETY BULLETIN FOR JANUARY 2018

Valley Fever

Valley fever, also called coccidioidomycosis, is an infection caused by the fungus *Coccidioides*. The fungus is known to live in the soil in the southwestern United States and parts of Mexico and Central and South America. The fungus has also been found in south-central Washington. People can get Valley Fever by breathing in the microscopic fungal spores from the air in these areas. Approximately 10,000 Valley Fever cases are reported in the U.S. each year. Nearly 70% of reported cases are from Arizona and nearly 30% are from California.

Symptoms

Most people (60%) who are exposed to the fungus *Coccidioides* never have symptoms. Other people may develop flu-like symptoms 1 to 3 weeks after exposure that go usually away on their own after weeks to months, including:

- Fatigue (extreme tiredness)
- Cough
- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Headache
- Night sweats
- Muscle aches or joint pain
- Rash on upper body or legs

In extremely rare cases, the spores can enter the skin through a wound and cause a skin infection. Approximately 5% to 10% of people who get Valley Fever will develop serious or long-term problems in their lungs. In an even smaller percent of people (about 1%), the infection spreads from the lungs to other parts of the body, such as the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord), skin, or bones and joints.

Sources of infection Valley fever **does not** spread from person to person. People and animals can get Valley Fever by **breathing in the fungal spores** from the environment in certain areas of the western U.S. and parts of Mexico and Central and South America. The fungus was also recently found in south-central Washington.

People at Risk

Anyone who lives in or travels to areas where *Coccidioides* is in the environment can get Valley Fever. Valley Fever can affect people of any age, but it's most common in adults aged 60 and older. Certain groups of people may be at higher risk for developing the severe forms of the infection, such as:

- People who have weakened immune systems, for example, people who:
 - Have HIV/AIDS
 - Have had an organ transplant
 - Are taking medications such as corticosteroids or TNF-inhibitors
- Pregnant women
- People who have diabetes
- People who are Black or Filipino

Diagnosis

Healthcare providers rely on your medical and travel history, symptoms, physical exams, and laboratory tests to diagnose Valley Fever. The most common way that healthcare providers test for Valley Fever is by taking a blood sample and sending it to a laboratory to look for *Coccidioides* antibodies or antigens. They might also collect a sputum sample and send it to a lab for examination. Healthcare providers may also do imaging tests such as chest x-rays or CT scans of your lungs.

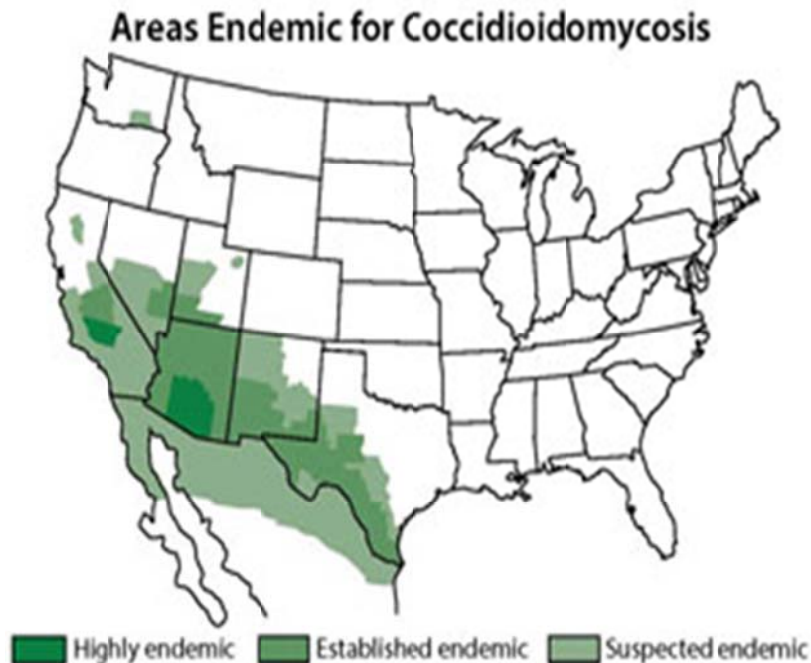
Treatment

For many people, symptoms will go away without any treatment. Healthcare providers choose to prescribe antifungal medication for some people to try to reduce symptoms or prevent the infection from getting worse. The treatment is usually 3 to 6 months of fluconazole or another type of antifungal medication. People who have severe lung infections or infections that have spread to other parts of the body always need treatment and may need to stay in the hospital. For these types of infections, the course of treatment is usually longer than 6 months.

Prevention

It's very difficult to avoid breathing in the fungus *Coccidioides* in areas where it's common in the environment. People who are at risk for severe Valley fever may be able to lower their chances of developing the infection by trying to avoid breathing in the fungal spores. The following are some common-sense methods that may be helpful to avoid getting Valley fever, but it's important to know that they haven't been proven to prevent it.

- Try to avoid areas with a lot of dust like construction or excavation sites. If you can't avoid these areas, wear an **N95 respirator** (a type of face mask) while you're there.
- Stay inside during dust storms and close your windows.
- Avoid activities that involve close contact to dirt or dust, including yard work, gardening, and digging.
- Use air filtration measures indoors.



Known and suspected areas where the fungus that causes Valley fever lives in the United States