

Federal Study Reveals Cause for Higher Rate of Valley Fever

By: Cecilia Chan - Sept. 23, 2009 10:19 AM
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Why the Northwest Valley boasts a higher rate of valley fever cases than the rest of the country is finally solved - it's due to more awareness of the respiratory infection.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released its findings to the Arizona Department of Health Services. People contract valley fever when they inhale fungal spores that become airborne when the desert soil is disturbed, such as by construction or monsoon winds. Federal epidemiologists in November collected blood samples from 1,594 people aged 65 and older. The department asked the CDC to do the study when routine surveillance for valley fever showed an increase in cases in the "We found the rate was higher in the Northwest Valley because more tests were done," said Laura Oxley, state health department spokeswoman.



Michael Schennum/The Arizona Republic

Pat White, founder of the Arizona Victims of Valley Fever, wears a mask at an informational meeting about valley fever at Chez Nous in Sun City West

"We knew that people were getting tested out there well and part of our educational campaign with rest of the Valley was getting other doctors to know more about it. Doctors out there were very well versed."

Oxley said the CDC results coincide with other studies by the state health department. Those have shown that doctors in the Sun City area are more likely to receive extra training in valley fever management and may be more likely to test for the disease.

The CDC tested blood from 797 people at least 65 who live in Sun City, Sun City West and Surprise and 797 people aged 65 and older who live elsewhere in Maricopa County.

There were nine positive results in the Northwest Valley blood samples and six in the samples taken outside of those areas, Oxley said.

"The difference is not statistically significant," she said.

Sun City West resident Pat White agrees that there is more awareness about valley fever in the Northwest Valley but questioned the findings.

"I look at things kind of with a grain of salt," said White, who has an extreme case of valley fever that has left her mostly bedridden. She founded a support group for valley fever patients. "There is still something very wrong going on here, even though doctors are testing for it more."

White, who has become an expert on the fungal disease and lectures on it, blames the sand and gravel industry, which mines the Agua Fria riverbed. There are no studies to support her claims.

Sun City West resident and mining critic Shirley McDonald also disputes the findings.

"I knew it wasn't going to work," she said of the study. "If you disturb the surface of the ground, that lets the fungus loose."

McDonald also chairs a grass-roots environmental task force.

"A lot of this is good news in terms of awareness among the population and medical community," said Joe Tabor, a University of Arizona epidemiologist. "Per capita, the Northwest Valley has more cases than anywhere in the country because it is an older community."

Older individuals are more susceptible to the infection than younger people who have stronger immune systems, he said.

He added that Northwest Valley retirees also have more access to health care and many come from non-endemic areas of the country. For instance, Tabor said his research shows that Hispanics who grew up in Tucson have fewer cases of valley fever compared with Hispanic immigrants in Bakersfield, Calif. They had higher incidents of the disease because they didn't have lifelong immunity, he said.

Nonetheless, Arizona still accounts for 60 percent of reported cases in the country, is due to a higher presence of the fungus in the state. "Geographically, we have more risks," Oxley said. "I don't know if it's a testing function or there is a lot more desert dust blowing in Arizona than in California."

Valley fever study

Arizona Department of Health Services interviewed 10 percent of Arizonans diagnosed with valley fever in 2007. Some findings:

- People missed an average of one month of work, for a total of 4,918 days.
- People with valley fever waited an average of 44 days before seeking health care.
- Patients saw their doctors three times before they were tested for valley fever.
- On average, patients suffered symptoms of valley fever for half a year, although many were sick longer.
- There were \$86 million in hospital charges for valley fever cases in 2007.
- Arizona accounts for 60 percent of reported cases in the country.
- Ninety-five percent of Arizona cases are in Maricopa, Pima and Pinal counties.
- Valley fever is the fourth most frequently reported infectious disease in Arizona
- Cases reported in Arizona have almost tripled, from 1,781 cases in 1999 to 4,832 cases in 2007 (75 per 100,000 populations).
- The highest age-adjusted rates of valley fever occur in Sun City and Sun City West.

Valley fever fundraiser

Valley Fever Alliance, a non-profit group, is sponsoring a walk of about 1 mile to raise awareness and funds for battling the disease.

"The sole purpose of our group is to find a cure for valley fever and to provide support for those people who have valley fever or their family or friends," said Marvin Freeman, group spokesman. "All of the money raised is going to research and education."

- **What:** Inaugural Walk to Save Lives.
- **When:** 8 a.m. to noon Nov. 1.
- **Where:** 550 E. Van Buren St. in Phoenix, in parking lot of the medical center of the University of Arizona.

• **Cost:** \$25 entry fee. Early entry is \$20 if signed up before Oct. 15. Early registration includes an official Walk for Valley Fever race cap and bandanna in a variety of colors: turquoise (for those who have had valley fever), red (for those who have had pets with valley fever), or white (for other supporters) - as well as giveaways on the day of the event. Canine companions are welcome.

• **Register:** Online at www.tinyurl.com/vfwalk or send a check to benefit: University of Arizona Foundation, College of Medicine, Valley Fever Center for Excellence at Valley Fever Center for Excellence Medical Research Building, P.O. Box 245215, Tucson, AZ 85724.

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