Fact Sheet

# Valley Fever

ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
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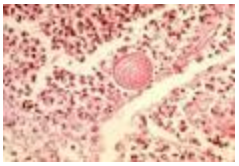
## What is Valley Fever?



Valley fever is an infection caused by the fungus *Coccidioides.* The scientific name for valley fever is "coccidioidomycosis," and it's also sometimes called "San Joaquin Valley Fever" or "desert rheumatism." The term "Valley Fever" usually refers to *Coccidioides* infection in the lungs, but the infection can spread to other parts of the body in severe cases is called "disseminated coccidioidomycosis".

## How is it Spread?

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 was also recently found in south-central Washington. People can get Valley Fever by breathing in the microscopic fungal spores from the air in these areas.

## Signs and Symptoms

Most people (60%) who are exposed to the fungus *Coccidioides* never have symptoms. Other people may have flu-like symptoms that go usually away on their own after weeks to months. If a person has symptoms that last for more than a week, they should contact their healthcare provider.

Symptoms of valley fever include:

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

Approximately 5 to 10% of people who get Valley Fever will develop serious or long-term problems in the 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.

## Diagnosis

Healthcare providers rely on medical and travel history, symptoms, physical examinations, 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.

Healthcare providers may do imaging tests such as chest x-rays or CT scans of the lungs to look for Valley Fever pneumonia. They may also perform a tissue biopsy, in which a small sample of tissue is taken from the body and examined under a microscope. Laboratories may also see if *Coccidioides* will grow from body fluids or tissues (this is called a culture).

## Treatment

For many people, the symptoms of Valley Fever will go away within a few months without any treatment. Healthcare providers choose to prescribe antifungal medication for some people to try to reduce the severity of symptoms or prevent the infection from getting worse. Antifungal medication is typically given to people who are at higher risk for developing severe valley fever. The treatment is

usually 3 to 6 months of fluconazole or another type of antifungal medication. There are no over-the-counter medications to treat valley fever. Valley Fever isn't contagious, so it is not necessary to stay home to avoid spreading the infection to other people.

## People at Risk

Anyone who lives in or travels to the southwestern United States (Arizona, California, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, or Utah), or parts of Mexico or Central or South America 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 valley fever, 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

## Prevention

It's very difficult to avoid breathing in the fungus *Coccidioides* in areas where it's common in the environment. People who live in these areas can try to avoid spending time in dusty places as much as possible.

The following are some common-sense methods that may be helpful to avoid getting Valley Fever. It's important to know that although these steps are recommended, they haven't been proven to prevent Valley Fever.

- Try to avoid areas with a lot of dust like construction or excavation sites. If unable to avoid these areas, wear an N95 respirator while there.
- Stay inside during dust storms and close windows.
- Avoid activities that involve close contact to dirt or dust
- Use air filtration measures indoors.
- Clean skin injuries well with soap and water to reduce the chances of developing a skin infection, especially if the wound was exposed to dirt or dust.
- Take preventive antifungal medication if healthcare provider says it is needed.

***For more sources of information on this topic visit:***
ST. CLAIR COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT www.scchealth.co
MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES www.michigan.gov/mdhhs
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION www.cdc.gov