Valley Fever (Coccidioidomycosis)

Valley fever refers to pneumonia caused by a type of fungus called *Coccidioides*.

Valley fever is also called **coccidioidomycosis**. The name "valley fever" comes from the fact that the natural habitat of *Coccidioides* is the southwestern United States, in particular the central California valley.

Transmission

Valley fever is acquired by breathing *Coccidioides* spores that are present in the air when soil and dust are disturbed. Valley fever cannot be spread from person to person. It is most often seen in people who live in or travel to California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, where *Coccidioides* is naturally found. *Coccidioides* is also found in Mexico and Central America. People who have a higher chance of getting valley fever when exposed to *Coccidioides* are those with weakened immune systems due to either medical conditions or medications. For example, people who have diabetes, have human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection, take high doses of steroids, or are being treated with chemotherapy for cancer are at higher risk of valley fever. Pregnancy is also a risk factor.

Symptoms

Only a small percentage of people who inhale *Coccidioides* spores actually develop symptoms of valley fever. Symptoms can last weeks to months and include

- Fever
- Cough, which can be a dry cough, a cough with phlegm, or a cough with bloody phlegm
- Flu-like symptoms such as muscle pain, joint pain, headache, and fatigue
- Rash

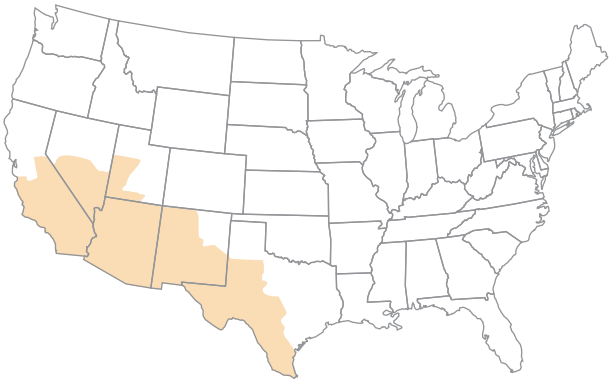
Diagnosis

The diagnosis of valley fever is based on the right clinical symptoms in the right geographical context. Confirmation of the diagnosis is done by testing the blood for *Coccidioides* antibodies. Sometimes a chest x-ray or computed tomography (CT) scan is helpful to detect changes from pneumonia. Testing of the sputum (phlegm) is rarely done because it is often difficult to get an adequate sample and test results take a long time.

Treatment

In otherwise healthy people, valley fever usually resolves on its own and does not require treatment. However, all patients diagnosed as having valley fever should follow up with their doctor every 3 to 6 months for up to 2 years to make sure the infection resolves without treatment. Patients whose symptoms do not resolve on their own or who have severe symptoms can be treated with antifungal medications. Treatment, when needed, is usually given for many months.

Areas in the United States where exposure to *Coccidioides* is most likely to occur



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. http://www.cdc.gov/features/valleyfever. Accessed October 9, 2013.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention *www.cdc.gov/fungal/coccidioidomycosis*

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Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Infectious Diseases Society of America

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