Valley Fever

‘Arizona’s illness’ can be extremely debilitating

Valley Fever ultimately affects many people who live in Arizona. Indeed, the majority of sufferers in the U.S. live at least part of the year here in the Grand Canyon State. The course of the illness and its prognosis can vary substantially, with health effects ranging from almost non-existent to extremely debilitating.

Scientifically known as Coccidioidomycosis — “Coccid” — Valley Fever is caused by a fungus whose spores are inhaled from soil or when dust becomes airborne. The vast majority of Arizona cases are confined to Maricopa, Pinal and Pima counties, said infectious disease specialist John Galgiani, M.D., a professor with The University of Arizona College of Medicine and director of the Valley Fever Center for Excellence in Tucson and Phoenix.

“Having Valley Fever was the worst four months of my life medically.”

—Lisa Stinchcomb

Valley Fever

continued from the cover

months, the infection cleared from her system. It was the worst four months of my life medically.”

Chronic Valley Fever

Sun City West resident Pat Curley White’s Valley Fever illness has been ongoing for nearly a decade. Diagnosed in March of 2006, her strain of Valley Fever will never go away. “Ten percent of patients will have the chronic or disseminated (affecting other organs besides the lungs) form of Valley Fever and never get well,” said White, who founded Arizona Victims of Valley Fever, Inc., a nonprofit, all-volunteer educational and support organization. “Think of Valley Fever like cancer,” she said. “There is no cure. It can come out of remission whenever it wants.”

Stay vigilant

Galgiani said there is no way to prevent becoming infected with Valley Fever if you live in Arizona. The risk per year is 1 in 30, he said, “so the longer you live here, the likelier it is that you will become infected.” But it’s important to remember, he said, that two out of three patients infected will not experience any symptoms from the disease.

Efforts to develop and test a vaccine for Valley Fever have been thwarted by a lack of funding for clinical trials, he said. So until a vaccine is marketed, Arizonans especially have to be mindful of the symptoms and seek medical attention sooner rather than later. Symptoms include chest pain, shortness of breath, cough, night sweats and fatigue, he said.

“If these symptoms appear, ask your doctor to test you for Valley Fever,” Galgiani said. “The sooner you get the correct diagnosis, the sooner you can get the correct treatment. This often means stopping antibacterial antibiotics and sometimes includes starting the antifungal fluconazole.”

More info

Valley Fever Center for Excellence
VFCEx@arizona.edu; 602-406-8253
Arizona Victims of Valley Fever
ArizonaVictimsOfValleyFever.org