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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**Valley Fever in Ventura County**

[Ventura County, CA] The risk of Valley Fever -- Coccidioidomycosis, or “cocci” -- has increased locally since the Thomas Fire. Giving time for an incubation period after the onset of the Thomas Fire, which began on 12/4/2017, there are 152 confirmed and suspected cases of cocci reported from 12/15/2017 through 2/28/2018.

“If we look just at last January, 2017, compared to this January, 2018, the State increase was 233%, Kern County was 402% and Ventura County 588%. Due to the relatively low number of cases in Ventura County, I’m not sure if we are statistically different from Kern County, so it is hard to say with confidence that the fire was the cause,” says Dr. Robert Levin, Ventura County Public Health Officer.

Valley Fever is caused by a fungus that lives in soil in some areas of California. It can infect the lungs and cause flu-like symptoms or severe illness.

The number of new cases of Valley Fever reported in Ventura County in 2017 was higher than 2016. Anyone can get Valley Fever, even healthy people and pets. Persons whose outside activities would lead to dust or soil exposure are at particular risk.

The risk of dissemination and severe disease is higher in infants, Filipinos, Hispanics, Blacks, those with weak immune systems, pregnant women, diabetics, and those 60 and over. It is not clear why more severe disease can occur in Filipinos, Hispanics and Blacks.

If you have had a cough, fever, night sweats or painful breathing for two or more weeks, talk to your health provider about Valley Fever. Anyone who lives, works, or visits in an area with Valley Fever can get infected.

Symptoms

In most cases, symptoms of Valley Fever occur within a week or two after exposure, though symptoms have been known occur as long as 2 years post-exposure. The earlier you get treatment, the better, so if you have been sick with cough, fever, night sweats or painful breathing for two weeks or more, contact your medical provider and ask about Valley Fever.

About 60% of infected people *will not* get sick. Those who do can have symptoms that include:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Cough
- Chest pain
- Night sweats
- Muscle or joint aches
- Headaches
- Weight loss
- Rash

Valley Fever can also infect the brain, joints, bone, skin, or other organs. This type of infection is rare, but it can be very serious, and sometimes fatal.

Most people with cocci have a pneumonia, but less than 0.5% of cases will have a skin problem, a bone or joint infection, or meningitis (infection of tissues around the brain).

How people (or pets) get Valley Fever

The organism is breathed in if the first few inches of top soil are disturbed by digging or cultivating. Winds blowing up dust can carry the organism further. Outbreaks have been seen following an earthquake. Soil denuded after a fire may be more likely to spread the infection. Valley Fever does not spread person-to-person. There has been a significant increase in Valley Fever in the past few months over previous years both in the State and Ventura County. Most people who get cocci fully recover and are usually protected from getting it again.

How to protect yourself from Valley Fever

The best way to reduce the risk is to avoid breathing in dirt or dust in places where Valley Fever is common. When it is windy, and the air is dusty, especially during dust storms:

- Stay inside and keep windows and doors closed
- While driving, keep car windows shut and use “recirculating” air conditioning if available
- If you must be outdoors, consider wearing an N95 mask or respirator (available at drug and hardware stores)

When working or playing in areas with exposed soil:

- Wet down soil before disturbing it to reduce dust
- Consider wearing an N95 mask

How Doctors diagnose and treat Valley Fever

Valley Fever is diagnosed by a doctor. Your doctor can order a blood test, chest x-ray, or other tests. If you are diagnosed with Valley Fever, your doctor will determine if you need treatment with antifungal medications.

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