



For Immediate Release:

November 20, 2008

HEALTH ALERT:

Cases of wound botulism confirmed in Los Angeles County

LOS ANGELES – The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health has recently confirmed two cases of wound botulism and is evaluating a third case. All three cases are heroin users in the South Bay region of the county. Two are known to have shared the same drug supply shortly before becoming ill. The third lives in the same neighborhood as the others.

These cases would indicate that recent heroin supplies in the Long Beach-South Bay area may be contaminated with bacteria that produce a paralyzing toxin that causes botulism. When these bacteria are injected just under the skin (“skin-popping”) the botulinum toxin they produce could lead to severe symptoms and even death. The bacteria cannot be eradicated through “cooking” the drug, or by cleaning needles or other drug paraphernalia. Injection drug users should never share needles, syringes, filters, or other equipment.

Symptoms of wound botulism include shortness of breath, difficulty with vision, difficulty breathing, and difficulty with swallowing and talking. Some patients may have visibly infected wounds near the drug injection site. Users experiencing these symptoms should seek emergency treatment as quickly as possible, as the disease may progress rapidly to paralysis and death.

The Los Angeles County Health Officer and Director of Public Health, Jonathan E. Fielding, MD, MPH, would like to advise health care professionals to be on alert for patients showing signs or symptoms compatible with botulism. These cases should be reported immediately to Public Health by calling the Acute Communicable Disease Control at 213-240-7941 or after-hours at 213-974-1234.

Public Health encourages all illegal substance users to seek help in kicking the habit. Individuals who are looking for treatment options are urged to call the 24-hour County information line at 2-1-1 from any landline or cell phone, or they can call Public Health’s Alcohol and Drug Treatment Program line at 1-800-564-6600 during regular business hours.

The Department of Public Health is committed to protecting and improving the health of the nearly 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Through a variety of programs, community partnerships and services, Public Health oversees environmental health, disease control, and community and family health. Public Health comprises more than 4,000 employees and an annual budget exceeding \$750 million. To learn more about Public Health and the work we do, please visit <http://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov>.

###