

Valley Fever (Coccidioidomycosis)



1. What is Valley Fever?

Valley Fever is an illness caused by a fungus. The fungus lives in the soil and dirt in some places in California and other areas in the Southern US, as well as Central and South America. It can get inside the lungs and cause an illness that might seem like the flu. Most people who get Valley Fever have mild symptoms and often get better on their own. More severe sickness is rare, but it can be serious and even deadly.

2. How do people get Valley Fever?

People can get sick when they breathe in spores, a form of the Valley Fever fungus. Spores are too small to be seen. They can get into the air when anything disturbs the soil, such as farming, construction, and wind. Valley Fever cannot spread from person to person.

3. Where is Valley Fever found?

The fungus that causes Valley Fever is often found in the Antelope Valley, which includes cities like Palmdale and Lancaster. Around the state, the fungus has been found in Kern County and around Central California. Since this fungus may be in other areas, it's always important to take basic safety measures around soil and dirt when you work, play, or travel.

4. What are symptoms of Valley Fever?

About 3 out of every 5 people who come in contact with the Valley Fever fungus will not get sick. People who get sick can have symptoms that last a month or more. These include:

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

In more serious cases, Valley Fever can sometimes infect the brain, joints, bone, skin, or other organs. Most people who get Valley Fever fully recover and are usually protected from getting it again.

Key Points:

- Valley fever is caused by a fungus found in some soil and dirt. People get sick when they work or play in the dirt and breathe in the fungus (spores).
- Most illness from Valley Fever is mild and people get better on their own. Rarely, it can cause serious illness and death.
- The best way to lower your risk is to avoid breathing in dirt or dust in areas where Valley Fever is more common.

For more information:

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health

<https://www.publichealth.lacounty.gov/acd/Diseases/Cocci.htm>

<https://publichealth.lacounty.gov/vet/coccidioidomycosis.htm>

California Department of Public Health

<https://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/CID/D/CDC/Pages/Coccidioidomycosis.aspx>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/fungal/features/valley-fever.html>

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5. How is Valley Fever diagnosed and treated?

See your doctor if you think you might have Valley Fever. Since the symptoms are like other illnesses, your doctor may order tests, such as a blood test or chest x-ray, to find out if you have Valley Fever. People with mild symptoms usually get better on their own without treatment. Your doctor can tell you if you need antifungal treatment.

6. Who is most at risk to get Valley Fever?

Anyone can get this illness, even young and healthy people. People who live, work, or travel in areas where dirt and soil is sent into the air, like construction, farming, and military have higher risk. Some people are more likely to suffer from severe illness from Valley Fever. These include people who have a health condition that makes them unable to fight off disease or a genetic (born with) risk. Other people at high risk include:

- Infants younger than 1 year old
- Adults who are 60 years or older
- African Americans and Filipinos
- Pregnant women (especially in the later stages of pregnancy)
- People with diabetes
- People with conditions that weaken their immune system (such as cancer, HIV, chemotherapy, steroid treatment, or organ transplant)

7. How can I lower my risk of getting Valley Fever?

The best way to lower your risk is to avoid breathing in dirt or dust in areas where Valley Fever is more common. If you can't avoid it, make sure to wet-down dirt and soil before working or playing in it to help prevent "dust clouds" or soil being sent into the air.

During dust storms, or when it is windy and the air is dusty:

- Stay inside and keep windows and doors closed
- While driving, keep car windows shut. Use "recirculating" air conditioning if you have it
- If you must be outside during a dust storm, wear a special (N95) face mask to help avoid breathing in dust.

8. What is being done about Valley Fever in Los Angeles County?

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health tracks the number of people who get Valley Fever and the places where people become ill. We also teach doctors, other health care providers, and the public about this illness. Many cities in Los Angeles County have laws that limit the amount of dust from construction activities.

9. Does Valley Fever affect animals or pets?

Many types of animals can have Valley Fever, but the most serious infections are usually seen in dogs, cats and primates. The most common symptom in dogs is coughing, but may also include low appetite, limping, enlarged joints, fever, and possibly diarrhea. Cats get infected less often, but may have skin problems (abscesses, draining lesions), fever, low appetite, and weight loss. Your veterinarian needs to perform tests to confirm the disease. Many times, a combination of x-rays, blood tests, and sometimes biopsy are needed to confirm infection. Treatment is with an antifungal medication and in some cases, the medication must be given for long periods of time. To protect pets from Valley Fever: Avoid stirring up dirt or dust, do not allow your pet to dig, and keep pets indoors with windows closed during dust storms.