

Valley fever now in Washington State

Information for Employers

What is Valley fever?

Washington workers are at risk for Valley fever (*coccidioidomycosis*). Valley fever is a disease caused by the *Coccidioides* fungus that has recently been found in the soil of southcentral Washington. Because the fungus is newly discovered in Washington, it can be hard to recognize, giving the infection time to become serious in some people.

Adults, children and animals can get Valley fever from breathing in dust or disturbed soil containing *Coccidioides* spores. The exposure can be from activities that may or may not be related to work. Valley fever is not spread from person or from animals to people.



***Coccidioides* spores can be inhaled at dusty work sites**

Symptoms may include:

- Extreme fatigue (tiredness)
- Cough
- Fever
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain
- Headache
- Night sweats
- Muscle aches or joint pain
- Rash

Jobs at risk include:

- Digging (construction, wildland firefighters, landscaping)
- Truck driving (highway and farm)
- Construction work (building and field preparation)
- Operating heavy machinery
- Agricultural work

Valley fever cases in Washington: During 2010 to 2014, 9 human cases of Valley fever with exposure in south-central Washington were reported to the WA State Department of Health.¹ Of these, 7 adults and 2 children contracted Valley fever from exposure to soil in Yakima, Benton, Franklin and Walla Walla counties.

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Worker Stories

Agricultural worker infected by Valley fever while working outdoors

A male agricultural worker in his 30's contracted Valley fever in 2014 while clearing new land. The worker endured symptoms for many months before ultimately being diagnosed with Valley fever. The infection advanced into his lungs, skin, and other organs. He was unable to work for several years while recovering from the health effects of the infection.

Construction manager infected while working in California

A male construction worker in his 50's from Washington State developed Valley fever in 2016 while on assignment in California. As a supervisor on a new construction project, he was close enough to the jobsite to breathe in dusty air. He improved with antifungal treatment and returned to work.

Workers exposed to dusty air should be aware of Valley fever, especially in Yakima, Benton, Franklin and Walla Walla counties. Valley fever can be difficult to diagnose because symptoms appear similar to common ailments.

Recommendations

When Valley fever is identified early, treatment can alleviate progression of the disease. If Valley fever progresses and is not treated, workers can suffer lost work time, and disability. Employers with workers in dusty environments should:

- Tell workers about the risks and symptoms (Valley fever for Workers [English](#), [Spanish](#))
- Encourage workers with cough, fever, or painful breathing for more than 2 weeks to visit a doctor
- Wet soil prior to disruption to reduce dust which may carry Valley fever spores
- Provide workers with dust masks

¹Washington State Communicable Disease Report 2015, Washington State Department of Health. DOH 420-004. (<http://www.doh.wa.gov/DataandStatisticalReports/DiseasesandChronicConditions/CommunicableDiseaseSurveillanceData/AnnualCDSurveillanceReports>)

The SHARP Program at the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries tracks work-related lung disease. For more information, contact the Safety and Health Assessment & Research for Prevention (SHARP) Program at the WA State Department of Labor and Industries at lni.wa.gov/Safety/Research/OccHealth/Asthma/default.asp, SHARP@lni.wa.gov or toll free at 1-888-667-4277.

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