

Valley Fever (Coccidioidomycosis)

What is Valley Fever?

Valley Fever is a disease caused by the fungus *Coccidioides immitis*, which exists as a mold found in the soil. The highest incidence of this disease occurs in the desert areas of the southwestern United States (right here in Arizona!). The disease occurs in most species of domestic animals, many exotic animals, and man. It is not considered contagious from one animal to another. It can occasionally be transferred from pet to man if the pet has a skin lesion that has been bandaged, and a human touches the bandage or the lesion.

The disease occurs as a result of the inhalation of fungal spores directly from the soil or from dust in the air. Animals of almost any age are susceptible to Valley Fever, but those from one to four years are most susceptible.

Two Forms of Valley Fever:

Valley Fever can occur in two forms: the primary form and the disseminated form. In the primary form, the infection develops two to four weeks from the time of exposure, and is primarily located in the lungs and thoracic lymph nodes. In the disseminated form, the disease process has advanced, allowing the infection to spread from the original lung site to other areas of the body such as bones, joints, skin, brain, liver, kidney and almost any other tissue.

Know What to Look For:

The signs seen with the primary form of the disease may include an elevated temperature of 104° to 105°, listlessness, anorexia or loss of appetite, and a pronounced dry, harsh cough. The cough may be confused with kennel cough in dogs. In disseminated cases, infection of the bones is the most prevalent type, causing lameness or limping. Other signs could include swelling of joints, weight loss, chronic coughing, skin abscesses (possibly zoonotic), pain, eye problems, incoordination or seizures.

Diagnosis and Treatment:

Valley fever is diagnosed via chest x-rays and blood serology testing sent to the lab. Treatment of Valley Fever should be started immediately. The treatment process may vary based on location of the infection and the degree to which the individual animal is affected. Several antifungal medications can be used to treat Valley Fever. Fluconazole is the most commonly used medication. Itraconazole is used for resistant or severe infections.

At the present time there is no known preventive other than decreasing your pet's exposure to the desert soil and dust as much as possible. It is best to keep your pet away from areas where the soil has been disturbed (construction sites), and keep them inside after it rains until the ground is completely dry.

After 3 months of treatment we will recheck a Valley fever titer to determine if the medication is working. This requires a recheck appointment and blood sample for the lab. We will recheck this titer every three months until the titer is normal or significantly reduced. At that time we may discontinue the treatment. However, some animals do require life long treatment.