

Deadly fungal disease outbreak in California prisons

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Over the past seven years, more than three-dozen inmates from two California Central Valley state prisons have died after contracting Valley Fever fungal disease. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have stepped in to investigate the outbreak.

Between 2006 and 2011, coccidioidomycosis, or Valley Fever, contributed to the deaths of 34 inmates at the Avenal and Pleasant Valley prisons. So far in 2012, the disease has been considered as a primary or secondary cause for nine inmates' deaths.

The coccidioides fungus is prevalent in the US Southwest, where temperatures are generally high and the soil is dry. The illness is frequently contracted when one inhales spores of the fungus, which originates in the region's soil. Farmers, construction workers, and other outdoor workers are most susceptible.

The fungus produces symptoms of fatigue, chest pains, fever, rash and, in some instances, the development of nodules in the lungs. There is currently no cure for the condition.

California's prison system is notoriously brutal. Last year, inmates went on a hunger strike against overcrowding and poor living conditions. The state holds a staggering 119,500 people in facilities built to hold 80,000.

As of April, California's 33 prisons were at 150 percent capacity, and 9,000 over the federal court-ordered cap. The administration of Democratic Governor Jerry Brown has haggled with the federal government for years over the inmate population cap.

Following a 2009 federal court order, the state has shuffled prisoners around, housing them in county jails, farming them out of state to be held in private prisons, and releasing a relative handful of low-level offenders.

The Brown administration is legally mandated to reduce the incarcerated population to 137.5 percent of

facility design capacity by December of this year. The state has largely flouted the courts.

In May 2011, the US Supreme Court upheld a lower court ruling that found conditions of overcrowding had such a dire impact on the health of inmates that their treatment constituted "cruel and unusual punishment." The case exposed instances in which dozens of sick inmates were held in cages awaiting medical treatment, and ill and disabled prisoners were routinely denied necessary care and medication.

The Supreme Court found that overcrowding in California's prison system resulted in at least "one needless death per week." Even the court's conservative assessment of the situation presents what is clearly a humanitarian disaster.

With the large majority of prison inmates brought in from outside the Central Valley, most do not have any sort of built-in-immunity, making it easier for prisoners to be infected by the fungus.

A study done by J. Clark Kelso, court receiver for prison health care, showed that African-Americans in the two prisons have a 90 percent increased risk, Latinos are at a 30 percent increased risk, and those older than 55 have a 60 percent higher risk.

Kelso accused the state of an "anemic response" to the health crisis. Six years ago the state was informed that it must transfer high-risk inmates, and possibly all inmates, out of the area if the Valley Fever infection rates did not drop. Beyond adding air filters and door seals that minimally kept out fungus-tainted dust, however, little has been done to prevent the spread of the fungus.

Between 2008 and 2011, 11 inmates filed claims related to Valley Fever with the state Victims Compensation & Government Claim Board. All were rejected.

Some 500 high-risk inmates now remain in the two prisons. Some 3,200 others are deemed at increased risk of developing a fatal reaction to the fungus, and are now being relocated.

An estimated 200 inmates are hospitalized every year due to Valley Fever, a figure that underscores the scale of the health risk within the prisons. In fact, a study conducted by the state prison health system found that the rate of Valley Fever inside Pleasant Valley State Prison in Coalinga was 600 times higher than outside the prison walls in Fresno County.

Another study done at Pleasant Valley State Prison in April 2012 found a rate of 7,011 cases of Valley Fever per 100,000 people.



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