

BLASTOMYCOSIS

Personal Health Fact Sheet

What is Blastomycosis?

*Blastomycosis is an uncommon, but potentially serious fungal infection. It primarily affects the lungs and skin and is caused by the fungus *Blastomyces dermatitidis*. The illness that can result from exposure to this organism is extremely variable.*

How is it spread?

Blastomycosis develops when spores of the *B. dermatitidis* are breathed in and cause an infection in the lung. In nature, the fungus probably resides in the soil in decaying foliage and vegetation. Only under quite specific conditions of humidity, temperature and nutrition can the fungus grow and produce the infecting spores. The spores become airborne when the soil in which the fungus is growing is disturbed. This aerosol is then inhaled by humans or other mammals. Thus, activities that involve disrupting the soil are likely to put a person at increased risk for acquiring blastomycosis. It is not spread person to person.

How is it treated?

Once blastomycosis has been diagnosed, the disease can be treated with one of three anti-fungal drugs – itraconazole, amphotericin B, or fluconazole. For life-threatening blastomycosis or blastomycosis of the central nervous system, amphotericin B is the treatment of choice. Itraconazole or fluconazole are excellent for treatment of patients who are not critically ill or who have no central nervous system involvement.

How can we prevent Blastomycosis?

Currently, there is no way to identify areas where the organism exists. Therefore, until more is known about the existence of *B. dermatitidis* in nature, it cannot be successfully controlled in the environment. More effective skin and blood tests are needed to diagnose blastomycosis and to survey individuals in areas where blastomycosis is suspected to be prevalent. Through such surveys, high risk areas in the environment could be identified and hopefully the necessary environmental conditions for the growth *B. dermatitidis* characterized. Control efforts may then be possible.

SYMPTOMS OF BLASTOMYCOSIS

Symptoms usually occur within 3 weeks to several months after being exposed to the fungus.

- **Some persons infected with *Blastomyces* fungus never develop symptoms. Evidence of their infection is only found by chance on a chest x-ray or blood test.**
- **Other individuals may develop an acute lung infection that begins with a fever and dry cough and may progress to weight loss, chest pain, and a persistent cough associated with thick sputum. Other symptoms may include muscle aches, night sweats, coughing up blood, shortness of breath, and chest tightness.**
- **In a small percentage of cases the infection may spread by blood to the skin, bone, or other organs.**



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