

# Blastomycosis

(adapted from Fact Sheets by Northwestern Health Unit and Manitoba Health)

## What is blastomycosis?

Blastomycosis is an uncommon infection of humans, dogs, cats and other animals caused by the fungus *Blastomyces dermatitidis* found in soil. It has been present in parts of Northwestern Ontario for years, but has appeared more recently in Thunder Bay.

The infection affects the lungs and skin, sometimes resulting in pneumonia or crusted, ulcerated pimples. Symptoms often do not appear until weeks or months after exposure.

## How can you get blastomycosis?

You get blastomycosis by breathing in the fungal spores or getting it on a scrape or cut. The fungus is found in moist, acidic soil, most often around bodies of water. Since this fungus is in the soil, construction, digging or gardening may cause the fungal spores to be carried into the air and inhaled.

You can only get blastomycosis from the fungal spores in the soil or air. You cannot get it from another person or an animal.

## Who is at risk?

Blastomycosis can affect anyone, but the risk of getting this infection is very low. Most healthy people are resistant to it. The body's natural defenses fight the fungus and prevent illness. The risk of infection may be higher for farmers, construction workers, hunters, campers and anyone else who is often exposed to moist soil that contains a lot of rotting leaves and wood.

This condition can be more severe in persons who have a weakened immune system.

## What are the symptoms of blastomycosis?

At first, blastomycosis may seem like the "flu" with cough, muscle aches, joint pain, tiredness, chills and fever. These symptoms may develop days to weeks after exposure to the fungus. In some people, these symptoms go away naturally but others may develop a persistent cough with yellow or green spit over the next few months. This may be the first sign of pneumonia. A blastomycosis infection usually starts in the lungs but sometimes it can cause a skin infection. This will look like red pimples, which can develop crusts or ulcers on the face or other exposed skin.

## What should you do if you think you may have blastomycosis?

If you are experiencing a persistent cough, muscle aches, joint pain, tiredness, chills, low grade fever, skin sores or unexplained weight loss, tell your doctor that you may have been exposed to the fungus that causes blastomycosis. The doctor will want to know if you have been in a high-risk area and in contact with soil or dust. Often the first symptoms of the disease are missed because it seems like other illnesses. Without treatment blastomycosis can become a serious, even fatal, illness.

The diagnosis can be made from a sample of spit, pus, urine or the skin lesions, depending on your symptoms. After diagnosis, prompt treatment is very important and may be required for several months. With early diagnosis, the treatment is very effective for most people.

### **How can I avoid blastomycosis?**

Even if you work, live or vacation in areas where the fungus lives, it is important to remember that blastomycosis is a rare condition and the risk of getting it is very low. Coming into contact with the fungus it does not necessarily mean you will get an infection. Little is known about the conditions that cause the fungus to grow or die out in the soil. There is a test to detect the presence of the fungus in the soil, but it is not widely available and cannot tell you whether there is enough of the fungus to cause infection. Even if the fungus is detected in the soil, there is no standard way of removing it. Therefore, it is not necessary for people to avoid any specific areas or take any specific precautions. Early diagnosis and treatment by a doctor is the best way to deal with blastomycosis. There is no vaccine for blastomycosis.

For more information:  
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