

## Arizonans can step up to help stop a scourge

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The Arizona Republic

The symptoms crept up. Marv Freeman had been bursting with energy after retiring from public relations. Now, he was overcome with lethargy. As he got sicker and sicker, doctors were stumped. Finally, as a last resort, they did a spinal tap. It saved his life. The doctors discovered Freeman had valley fever, which had led to potentially fatal spinal meningitis.

Seven years later, Freeman is doing publicity for the Walk To Cure Valley Fever in Phoenix on Nov. 7.

This is the high season for cause-related walks and runs. They're all worthy events. But Arizonans have a special reason to support the effort against valley fever.

It's our disease. It's our fight.

Valley fever is caused by inhaling spores of a fungus that grows in the desert soils of the Southwest. It's virtually unknown outside our region.

Arizona is ground zero. Two-thirds of U.S. cases occur here. About 30,000 Arizonans a year fall seriously ill with valley fever. It can be disabling and deadly, spreading to the bones, skin, spinal cord and brain. Animals are vulnerable, as well, so the victims include our pets.

There's no cure, only treatment with anti-fungal drugs. In persistent cases, like

Freeman's, patients must take the drugs for the rest of their lives.

But coccidioidomycosis, the scientific name for valley fever, gets little attention or funding.

It's up to Arizonans to rally.

The toll is not only personal but public, including lost work time, reduced productivity, impact on families, and medical expenses.

A 2007 study found that valley fever rang up \$86 million in annual hospital costs. Diagnosis was often slow, taking a median of 23 days but, in many cases, stretching out months or years. The pneumonia caused by valley fever is often mistaken for a bacterial infection: 60 percent of patients in the study had been given useless and needless doses of antibacterial drugs, losing precious time.

We need better diagnostics, more research funding and higher awareness.

"I've talked to so many people who have lived here all their lives, and they've never heard of valley fever," said epidemiologist Clarisse

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Tsang of the Arizona Department of Health Services.

We can change that. Gov. Jan Brewer proclaimed Nov. 6-13 as Valley Fever Awareness Week. On Wednesday night, the Maricopa Association of Governments passed a resolution to promote public awareness of the disease.

And then, there's the Nov. 7 walk. The money it raises will benefit the Valley Fever Center for Excellence at the University of Arizona, which is pursuing education, patient care and research. (A similar Tucson event held Oct. 10 raised more than \$20,000.) A spin-off company, Valley Fever Solutions, will do clinical trials of a promising drug, nikkomycin Z, next year, thanks to a \$3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health. Work is proceeding on a vaccine.

This is the second annual Walk To Cure Valley Fever. The more we support it, the bigger the step forward.

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