

Dust storm stirs up more health concerns

By Jeff Dempsey, Daily News-Sun | Posted: Friday, July 15, 2011 8:15 pm

Count Sun City West resident Pat White among those worried about the health effects of last week's massive dust storm.

"(Tuesday) is the day," she said in reference to July 12. "This is the first day since that haboob that people who were infected could start showing signs."

The incubation period typically results in symptoms between seven and 31 days after the storm.

"Absolutely, people should be paying attention," she said. "Between now and Aug. 2, pay attention for the signs."

White, who was diagnosed with valley fever in January 2006, has spent most of her time since then raising awareness and fighting for a cure, including founding the Arizona Victims of Valley Fever group. She said dust storms should be avoided, especially those of last week's caliber.

"And if you're going to do something like garden, wear a respirator mask," she said. "And if you have to drive through a dust storm, be sure to circulate your air."

Shirley McDonald, chair of the Joint Environmental Task Force, said the level of particulates in the air was astounding.

"The readings from the Zuni Hills air monitor (in north Peoria) show a peak of 1,800 micrograms per cubic meter," she said. "The average for the day was 140. I thought that was pretty impressive."

John Galgiani, director of the Valley Fever Center for Excellence at the University of Arizona College of Medicine, said he expects to see a large increase in valley fever cases over the next two to three months, in line with what happened after a similar event in California in the late 1970s.

"Years ago, a Santa Ana wind storm blew dust from the Central Valley as far north as the San Francisco Bay Area," he said. "Kern County in California, like Maricopa County, is heavily endemic for the fungus that causes valley fever. As published in a medical journal, that storm resulted in 120 extra valley fever infections in Kern County, mostly in the subsequent two months."

Galgiani said he expects to see many more cases after this haboob, an Arab word used to describe a thick dust storm or sandstorm that blows in deserts.

"Because Maricopa County has 10 times the number of people and three times the proportion of the population susceptible to first valley fever infections, we should expect 3,600 additional valley fever infections in Maricopa County for a total of 5,000 infections in July and August," he said.

Galgiani echoed White's advice, saying symptoms like chills, sweating fever or joint pain should be taken seriously.

“People living in Phoenix and the surrounding areas should know about this risk and seek medical attention if they develop symptoms of pneumonia during that time,” he said.

For information, visit www.arizonavictimsofvalleyfever.org.

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