

RISK SIMPLIFIED

RESOURCES

[CDPH Valley fever Webpage](#)

[Labor Code Section 6709](#)

[Preventing Work-Related Valley Fever](#)

[Cal/OSHA Protection
from Valley Fever](#)

QUESTIONS

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Valley Fever

by Sarah Bruno, ARM

Valley fever (coccidioidomycosis) is an illness that usually affects the lungs. It is caused by a microscopic fungus that lives in the top 2 to 12 inches of soil in many parts of California, especially the Central Valley and Central Coast. When soil is disturbed by activities such as digging, driving, or high winds, fungal spores can become airborne and potentially be inhaled by workers. Valley fever is not a contagious disease - it cannot be spread from person to person.

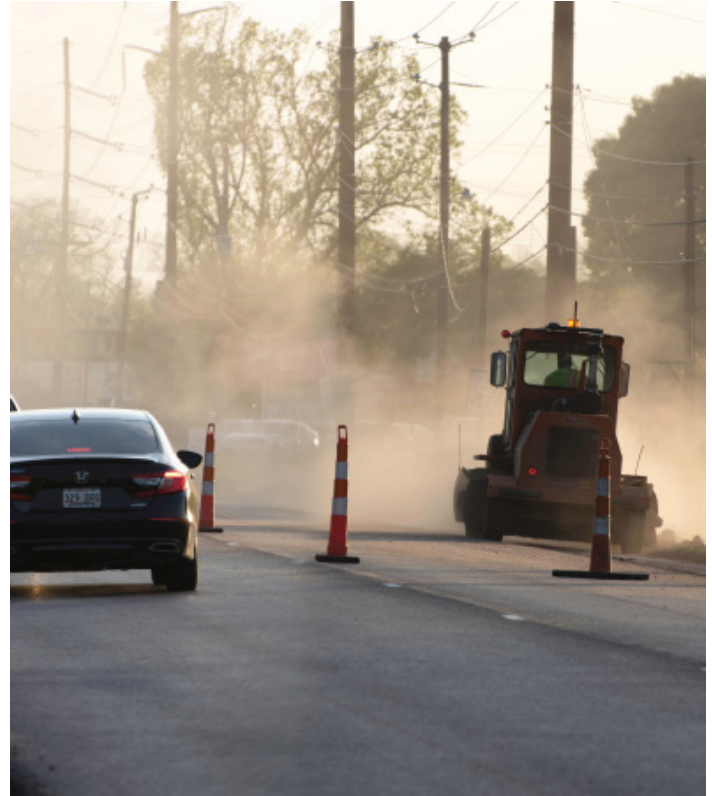


According to the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) the number of reported cases of Valley fever tripled from 2014 to 2018. Because Valley fever is a known hazard to outdoor workers, it is important for risk managers to understand the risk and control measures that can be implemented, in addition to the training requirements for employees.

Control Measures

The best practice is to treat all soil as if it contains the fungus that causes Valley fever, especially in counties where Valley fever is known to occur. There are many exposure prevention methods, this includes, but is not limited to:

- Employees should be instructed to:
 - Wet the soil before disturbing it and continuously while digging or moving earth
 - Minimize the amount of digging by hand
 - Minimize the amount of soil disturbed
 - Stay upwind of digging and other dust-producing activities when feasible
 - Use water to wash dusty equipment before moving offsite, when feasible
 - Stabilize all soils piles by tarping or other methods
 - Keep dust away from food and drinks
 - Should clothing get soiled, take precautions to prevent bringing dust into a vehicle or home
 - Shower and wash hair as soon as possible at the end of each shift
- Outdoor work should be avoided during dust storms or high winds.
- Heavy equipment and occupied vehicles on a jobsite should have enclosed, air-conditioned cabs with high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters. Operators should have a way to communicate so that windows can remain closed.
- If exposure to dust cannot be avoided, workers should be protected by NIOSH-approved respirators with particulate filters under a respiratory program as required by Cal/OSHA. Bandanas and simple dust masks do not protect workers from breathing in dust and spores.



Training Requirements

Recent legislation requires that construction employers in counties where Valley fever is highly endemic provide annual employee training. In this legislation “highly endemic” is defined as having an incidence rate of greater than 20 cases per 100,000 persons per year. The CDPH publishes a report on Valley fever, including the incidence rates by county annually, the final year end reports can be found on the CDPH website [here](#).

12 counties had rates meeting the highly endemic definition in the most recent publication. They are Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Merced, Monterey, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Stanislaus, Tulare, and Ventura.

The legislation also dictates what topics must be included in the training. This includes:

- What Valley fever is and how it is contracted
- High risk areas and types of work and environmental conditions during which the risk of contracting Valley fever is highest
- Personal risk factors that may create a higher risk for some individuals
- Personal and environmental exposure prevention methods
- The importance of early detection, diagnosis, and treatment
- Recognizing common signs and symptoms of Valley fever
- The importance of reporting symptoms to the employer and seeking medical attention for appropriate diagnosis and treatment
- Common treatment and prognosis for Valley fever

Risk Managers should first determine if Valley fever is present in the county where they work, then ensure proper control measures are in place, and finally train employees who may be exposed. While the risk is well established for construction workers, the potential exposure should be evaluated for all outdoor workers.

A course entitled “PRISM: Valley Fever Awareness” was created by PRISM Risk Control staff to help members meet this training requirement. The course is available to all PRISM members on the [Vector Solutions LMS platform](#).

For additional questions and assistance, please contact PRISM's [Risk Control Department](#).