

Tuberculosis rates increasing in Washington

Local News

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OLYMPIA — The number of tuberculosis cases has been dropping nationally for 17 straight years, but that’s not the case in Washington. Our state is one of the few where the infection is increasing. The trend in the first quarter of this year shows the increase may continue.

Last year 256 cases of tuberculosis (TB) were reported in the state. That’s a 12 percent increase from the 228 cases in 2008. In the last 10 years, TB rates in Washington have almost always been higher than the national average. The counties with the most cases in 2009 were King (130), Pierce (34), Snohomish (28), Clark (16), and Spokane (9).

“Many people think tuberculosis is a thing of the past, but we know differently,” says Secretary of Health Mary Selecky. “People are often hit hard by TB. It’s a difficult disease to treat, especially for patients who have drug-resistant strains.”

TB remains an important public health challenge, and resources must be focused on the strategy to find and treat infected patients appropriately. Timely treatment with proper antibiotics is the key to survival and less severe symptoms.

Tuberculosis is a bacterial infection (www.doh.wa.gov/cfh/TB/tbfact.htm) that usually affects the lungs, but can attack other parts of the body. Most symptoms include fever, night sweats, fatigue, weight loss, and a persistent cough. Some people may be infected with TB and have no symptoms. People with HIV/AIDS, those younger than five and older than 50, and those with weakened immune systems are at increased risk. Tuberculosis is spread in the air when a person with infectious TB coughs.

Drug-resistant tuberculosis is also increasing in Washington. This type of TB infection requires different antibiotics to treat and can be extremely costly. In 2009 two cases of drug-resistant tuberculosis were reported to the state Department of Health. Infection control procedures must be in place in hospitals or health-care settings to prevent exposure to TB and its spread.

Tuberculosis rates are often higher among racial and ethnic groups. In Washington, Asians had the highest rate increase in 2009 compared to 2008, while American Indian/Alaskan Natives had the biggest decrease. More than 70 percent of 2009 cases in the state were in foreign-born individuals. Health care providers, lab workers, and public health agencies must continue to work together to guard against the resurgence of tuberculosis. Just 75 years ago, TB killed nearly 1,000 state residents every year. In 2009, there were three deaths from the infection in Washington, yet the total number of cases continues to climb. While there’s been considerable work done to prevent the spread of this disease, fighting TB is a long-term commitment that must be met by the public health and health care communities.

March 24 is World TB Day. Worldwide, tuberculosis is one of the leading causes of death from infectious disease. Every year, about nine million people are infected with TB around the world, and nearly two million die. World TB Day provides the opportunity to share solutions and discuss issues related to this pandemic and to support worldwide TB control efforts.