

Key Messages – Public Health Issue: Cryptococcal Disease

Updated June 2010

Background

The BC Centre for Disease Control confirms that the *Cryptococcus gattii* fungus exists in the Vancouver Island and Vancouver, Coast and Mountains tourism regions. In very rare cases, *Cryptococcus gattii* can cause Cryptococcal disease. There were 21 reported cases of Cryptococcal disease in BC in 2008 (BCCDC 2008 Report on Communicable Diseases in BC). The BCCDC reports that the rate of infection (0.5 per 100,000 people) has been on the decline for the past two years.

The BC Centre for Disease Control first notified the public in June 2002 that *Cryptococcus gattii* had been found to exist at Rathtrevor Beach Provincial Park near Parksville on Vancouver Island. Further studies that same year showed that its range extended throughout the south and east coasts of Vancouver Island. Since then it has also been found in Metro Vancouver, the Fraser Valley and throughout the Lower Mainland of BC.

The fungus is now being reported in Washington and Oregon, with human infection generating media coverage that in some cases mentions Vancouver Island as the place where the fungus first originated in North America.

Cryptococcus is a tiny (microscopic) yeast-like fungus. Varieties of the fungus – including *Cryptococcus gattii* – are found naturally in the environment in BC and in other places around the world (including widespread areas of Australia and Brazil). Most people living in areas where *Cryptococcus* grows will be exposed to the fungus sometime during their lifetime, but most will never get sick.

Cryptococcal disease is a very rare disease caused by the *Cryptococcus* fungus. The infection is caused by breathing in the spores of the *Cryptococcus* fungus. There are no particular precautions that can be taken to avoid Cryptococcal disease. People can, however, be alert for long lasting or severe symptoms and consult a physician (or veterinarian for animals) for early diagnosis and treatment. It is not spread from person to person or from animal to person. A person with Cryptococcal disease is not contagious.

The risk of illness to visitors is extremely low on Vancouver Island, as it is everywhere the fungus exists.

Tourism Vancouver Island's issues management activities regarding Cryptococcal disease have shifted to maintenance and monitoring since the peak crisis communications periods in 2002 and 2003. Close collaborative on issues management with Island DMOs, the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts and health officials, continues to be the priority to ensure coordinated accurate information is getting out to travellers through front line tourism staff, Info Centre personnel and health authorities.

- BC Health officials stress that it is very safe to travel to Vancouver Island. The chance of contracting this disease is extremely rare, and it is treatable.
- Based on the advice from public health officials, people should not be concerned about enjoying parks, camping and outdoor activities on Vancouver Island. The risk of infection is extremely rare and health officials stress that the benefits of healthy outdoor pursuits far outweigh any potential risks.
- The fungus that causes the disease occurs naturally in the environment and is found not only on Vancouver Island, but throughout Metro Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, Washington State and Oregon, as well as many other places in the world such as Australia and Brazil.
- For more information on Cryptococcal Disease visit: www.bccdc.ca

Q&A's from the BC Centre for Disease Control Website

Where is this fungus found?

- Varieties of the *Cryptococcus* fungus are found naturally in the environment in B.C. and in other places around the world, in tropical and subtropical climates in countries such as Brazil and Australia. The *gattii* variety of the fungus lives on trees and in the soil on the east coast of Vancouver Island. Due to recent human and animal cases in the Vancouver Coastal and Fraser Health Regions, it is now suspected to be found in these areas as well.

Why did the fungus appear in B.C.?

- It is not clear why *Cryptococcus gattii* appeared in B.C. It may have been imported or it may have always existed on Vancouver Island and increased in prevalence due to climate or environmental change.

Is it safe to travel to Vancouver Island?

- Yes. It is safe to travel to Vancouver Island. The risk of contracting the disease is very low and in almost all cases the disease can be treated. The benefits of outdoor exercise far outweigh the risks of cryptococcosis. All areas where the fungus has been found remain open to the public.