



SAFETY BULLETIN

HISTOPLASMOSIS EXPLORATION HAZARD

BACKGROUND

In March 1998 an exploration geologist contracted a serious case of histoplasmosis after entering an old mining adit in the New England region. Within one week of exposure he was admitted to an intensive care unit where he was treated with antifungal drugs, which saved his life. At the time the Chief Inspector of Mines issued an immediate notification circular, dated 21 April 1998, to alert the mining industry to the hazard.

The department has again been made aware of two incidences where histoplasmosis has resulted in serious illness to mine personnel; tragically one of these people died after contracting the disease in Mexico.

WHAT IS HISTOPLASMOSIS?

Histoplasmosis is caused by *Histoplasma capsulatum*, a fungus. It is an infection that varies in symptoms and seriousness. It usually affects the lungs; however, it can lead to enlargement of the liver and spleen, and sores in the mouth. Disseminated histoplasmosis can be fatal.

HOW DO YOU CONTRACT IT?

The fungal spore is present in soil, particularly soil with a high content of bat or bird droppings. If the soil containing the fungus is disturbed, the fungus spores become airborne and can be inhaled.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

Most infected persons have no symptoms. When symptoms occur, they vary widely, depending on the form of the disease. The lung infection can be short-term (acute) and relatively mild, or it can be long-term (chronic) and serious. Symptoms can include tiredness, fever, chills, chest pains, a dry cough and usually appear in 5 to 18 days (usually 10 days).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Unless absolutely necessary, avoid entering any workings where bats or bird colonies are known to exist.
- Ensure thorough risk assessments are conducted before entering these mine workings.
- Avoid areas where the fungus might be growing, especially areas with accumulations of bird or bat droppings.
- Avoid disturbing accumulations of bat and bird droppings.
- Before stirring up the soil, spray the area with a mist of water.
- When working in high-risk areas, wear disposable clothing and high-quality respiratory devices, (evidence exists to suggest that respirator devices may not provide protection against the disease).
- Educate your team on the earlier detection of symptoms.

Further information can be obtained from;

www.cdc.gov - Department of Health and Human Services - Centre for Disease Control and Prevention,

“Histoplasmosis – Protecting Workers at Risk”

Signed



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