

JUST ONE BREATH: More faces of Valley Fever

REPORTING ON HEALTH COLLABORATIVE

September 15, 2012

'Not being able to breathe was the worst.'

MERCED -- The walk from Tom Price's living room to his kitchen was only a few feet. But it felt like miles.

Related Photos



By Marci Stenberg/Merced Sun-Starrg@mercedsunstar.com

Merced resident Tom Price, 33, came down with Valley Fever in 2006. He spent seven days in the hospital and it took about a month to recover.



By Casey Christie / The Californian

Dr. Yakdan Al Qaisi contracted a bad case of Valley Fever a few years ago.

Related Stories

-- JUST ONE BREATH: Valley Fever robs daughter of mother at crucial time

JUST ONE BREATH: Valley Fever cases reach epidemic levels, but harm remains hidden

-- JUST ONE BREATH: Changing climate may expand Valley Fever's impact

"Even when I got out, I was still barely able to get up," he said. "It was definitely the most negative time that I've gone through in my life."

He remembers having to walk very slowly and having to sit down and breathe before he could continue to walk.

The 33-year-old from Merced was hit with Valley Fever in 2006. He had trouble breathing, and he was so fatigued for a month that the simplest tasks felt arduous.

"It was scary," he said. "It was the first time I had ever been very sick. Not being able to breathe was the worst."

Price remembers developing a high fever and sweats. He went to his regular doctor, who thought he had the flu.

Late that night, his fever climbed to 104, he developed red bumps on his face and neck that later spread. When he began to have difficulty breathing, he went to the emergency room at Kaweah Delta Medical Center in Visalia. There, doctors treated him as if he had pneumonia and told Price that the bumps were bug bites.

He was sent home, but the symptoms persisted.

"I went back to my normal doctor and he had a hunch at that point that I had Valley Fever," he said, adding that his doctor's wife had suffered from the disease.

His doctor sent him back to Kaweah Delta, where he was admitted. Blood samples were sent to UC Davis and later, which confirmed he had Valley Fever. He spent seven days in the hospital, where doctors treated him for the fungal disease.

Price could barely eat, and he had to undergo breathing treatments every hour with an inhaler.

"It was brutal," he recalled.

And things didn't get much better after he was discharged from the hospital.

Price said that with the number of cases increasing, it will be likely that people will know at least someone who had Valley Fever. His sister, Rhonda Nelson, 51, was stricken with Valley Fever in 2011.

It will take people like him and his sister to share their stories to create more public awareness, he said. "Not only for our medical community to be aware of it, but to know how to recognize the symptoms and be able to diagnose it," he said.

-- *Yesenia Amaro*

'Once it hits your kidneys, your kidneys are scarred.'

FRESNO -- After two harrowing experiences with Valley Fever, 29-year-old Irma Arrollo thought she had finally beat the fungal disease.

In 2007, when she was 23, the disease invaded her lungs and kidneys. She couldn't breathe and was throwing up constantly.

She spent about three weeks in the hospital, and missed one month of work at United Way of Tulare County.

Two years later, in 2009, the disease reappeared as a red rash across her legs. The rash became "big, gushing, purple things" that scarred her ankles, caused her legs to swell, and impeded her ability to walk, she said.

She was in the hospital for three more weeks and missed three more months of work. She and her mother were the family breadwinners, and without Arrollo's full paycheck during that time, the family could only afford necessities, like food, water and electricity.

Then, this spring, Arrollo, became very tired, her nails turned brittle, and she experienced heavy menstrual cycles.

A visit to the doctor revealed that while she did not currently have Valley Fever, her first bout with the disease had compromised her kidneys. The organs were no longer producing red blood cells, and were not performing their vital role of filtering waste products from the blood, she said.

Now, she has to undergo dialysis in the striped bedroom of her Fresno home four times a day, for about 30 minutes each time. She will eventually go on the waiting list for a new kidney.

She keeps a positive attitude, but does not sugarcoat her assessment of how the disease has depleted her energy, weakened her immune system, and lingered in her body.

"It really changes your life," she said. "It is not just a cold; it is not just something that is going to go away. It is something that you will have. Once it hits your lungs, your lungs are scarred. Once it hits your kidneys, your kidneys are scarred."

She said she hopes that doctors will learn to recognize the symptoms and save more people from her fate.

"It is really a very dangerous thing when it goes untreated and goes unnoticed," she said. "It is kind of like a silent poison."

-- *Rebecca Plevin*

'Don't stress me. It will flare up.'

Dr. Sarwa Aldoori still remembers the night her husband deteriorated from Valley Fever complications.

It was two weeks before Easter last year, and the family was enjoying barbecued kabobs at home in Bakersfield. Her husband, Dr. Yakdan Al Qaisi, 58, said he didn't feel well and began violently vomiting in the living room.

Aldoori and her daughter rushed him to Bakersfield Memorial Hospital, where he stayed for two weeks, hovering close to death. The pneumonia he had contracted after a Valley Fever infection had turned his blood toxic, and his breathing deteriorated. Eventually, doctors had to stick a tube down his throat to help him breathe.

"I thought, 'Is he going to go? Is this it?'" Aldoori recalled, her eyes wet with emotion. "I don't think I'll ever get over it."

Before coming to Kern County, both physicians had heard of Valley Fever but never imagined their lives would be so affected by the fungus. Al Qaisi simply thought prevention was a matter of avoiding dust.

But he doesn't remember any dust storm associated with his illness. He simply breathed Bakersfield air.

Then one night he woke up with his pillow soaking wet and his temperature soaring. He didn't feel like eating, and, over the course of several weeks, he lost 30 pounds.

Al Qaisi sent his own blood to the Kern County Department of Public Health, and he tested positive for Valley Fever. But that wasn't the end of it. The illness had weakened his body, leading to pneumonia.

Valley Fever had lingering effects beyond his family. Al Qaisi had to stay home from work for six weeks, leaving his wife to cover for the dozens of patients he couldn't see.

His wife, also a family medicine physician, shuttered the entire practice for two weeks while her husband was hospitalized.

"It was very, very hard because it was so unexpected," Aldoori said. "He was very healthy."

Even now, Al Qaisi's battle isn't over. He wonders whether it ever will be. He still fears a relapse of the fungus his body will always harbor.

"I always say, 'Don't stress me,'" he said. "It will flare up."