

Healthy Living

Fighting Valley Fever

By
Jodie Snyder



Arizona genetics researchers are taking the unusual step of asking for dog lovers' help in fighting a mysterious, potentially lethal infection that plagues both dog and man.

They are looking for dogs to be registered and potentially to have their DNA collected to help combat valley fever, a fungus-based disease once confined to the Southwest desert but is now spreading across the country.

Valley fever can be triggered by [inhalation of just a handful of spores](#) of a particular fungus. People, dogs and cats are susceptible to the illness that was once believed to occur only in Arizona and California. The disease is not contagious and is not spread from species to species.

The risk for valley fever increases as climates get drier, say California State University, Bakersfield researchers. Warmer temperatures and less rain basically kill off the fungus' competitors for nutrients and thereby creating an ideal growing environment for the infection-causing fungus.

Valley fever is now being reported in states such as Michigan, Ohio and Minnesota, which never used to see the condition. And the states that typically see the condition are reporting more and more cases: The number of Valley Fever reports is increasing in more than a third of California's counties, putting more dogs at risk for a

disease that can lead to lameness, extreme weight loss and coma.

When Charlie, a 75-pound Chocolate Lab, started coughing, it didn't set off any alarms. But then he developed a fever and was diagnosed as having kennel cough, which can be easily treated by antibiotics and steroids. Then the symptoms returned and again it was misdiagnosed as pneumonia. More than two months passed before Charlie was given the correct medication; the delay in a correct diagnosis lessens his chances for a full recovery.

Charlie now spends most of his time sleeping off the effects of valley fever, instead of being his normal playful self.

There is no cure for valley fever. Currently treatments focus on helping dogs beat the symptoms. Vet bills can mount up since a dog may have to get medication for up to eighteen months; in some severe cases, a dog may be on medicine for the rest of his life. It is estimated that Arizona dog lovers spend \$60 million per year in caring for dogs with valley fever.

Seeing the increase in valley fever cases across the U.S., Phoenix-based Translational Genomics Research Institute (TGen) researchers are now asking for dog people to [take a brief online survey](#) about their pet's breed, health history and lifestyle. After the survey, the dog may be selected to give a saliva sample.

Then after the swabbing is done, researchers will look for differences in the genes of dogs who are sick compared to dogs who show signs of exposure to valley fever but who aren't sick.

"In certain dogs, a minor infection can progress to severe disease, and the reasons for this are unknown," said Dr. Bridget Barker, assistant professor and head of TGen's Northern Arizona Center for Valley Fever Research in Flagstaff, Ariz.

This information would be used to help develop new therapies for both dogs and people, she said.

For more information about TGen's Valley Fever PAWS (Prevention, Awareness, Working for Solutions), visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/vfpaws, and on Twitter at [@ValleyFeverPAWS](https://twitter.com/ValleyFeverPAWS).

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Photo of Wilson by [Karah Levely-Rinaldi](#)