Cryptococcus Gattii Yeast or Fungus Fatality File

Fungus infection kills 2 B.C. men

Two Vancouver Island men have died this summer from Cryptococcus gattii, a tropical fungal infection that was first reported in B.C. seven years ago, say health officials.

Vancouver Island Health Authority spokeswoman Karen Heimlich said 16 to 23 cases are reported annually on Vancouver Island, with one to three people dying of it each year. The fungus is found in trees and soil.

While there is no vaccine to prevent infection, she says it is treatable with antifungal medication.

The spores have been found all the way from Port Renfrew on the southwest coast of the Island to Campbell River on the northeast coast. Some cases have also been reported on the Lower Mainland.

Heimlich said many people in the area have been exposed to the yeast-like spores, but adds that the chances of becoming ill are very low.

She notes that frail, elderly people, and people with compromised immune systems are most at risk from the fungus. The symptoms are similar to those of pneumonia or meningitis, including:

- A cough lasting weeks or month.
- Sharp chest pain.
- Unexplained shortness of breath.
- Severe headache.
- Fever.
- Night sweats.
- Weight loss.

Heimlich reiterates that there is no cause for panic, as most

residents of southwestern B.C. will never get sick from Cryptococcus gattii, and if they do, it’s treatable.