Health Department
Kansas City Missouri

Burkholderia cepacia

The disease

Burkholderia cepacia is a kind of bacteria that used to be called *Pseudomonas cepacia*. A healthy person may have *B. cepacia* and have no symptoms, but if someone is already very sick, *B. cepacia* can make him or her worse. Originally known to cause "root-rot" in onions, it is now used as a natural pesticide against other plant diseases, and it can be found in damp environments, soil and plant surfaces. Several different types of *B. cepacia* have been found so far, making it difficult to study. It can be spread from person to person, though how is not currently known. It grows in colonies in body fluids and has been known to live in contaminated medicines or on medical devices in hospitals.

The symptoms

When a healthy person tests positive for *B. cepacia*, there are often no symptoms. In a sick person, a *B. cepacia* infection usually attacks the lungs and causes them to deteriorate. Sometimes this is a gradual process, depending on the health of the person and on what type of *B. cepacia* he or she has. It can also be a very fast process, causing pneumonia and death.

Patients with catheters can be infected with *B. cepacia*, causing urinary tract infections. *B. cepacia* has also been known to cause "foot-rot" among soldiers. It is more commonly found, however, in the lungs of cystic fibrosis (CF) patients and those with chronic lung disease, where it can cause serious health problems.

Prevention

B. cepacia can live on skin for 60 minutes, on moist surfaces for weeks, and in water for years. The best way to prevent infection is good hand washing with soap and water. Hand washing should be done before and after contact with others, or after contact with objects or surfaces that have become contaminated. Not only do patients have to wash their hands, but nurses, doctors, therapists, and aides do as well. Heating and drying are the best ways of killing *B. cepacia* bacteria on a solid surface. People who have tested positive for *B. cepacia* should be kept separate from very ill patients or those with CF.

Treatment

B. cepacia is naturally resistant to many kinds of medicines. Once a person has a *B. cepacia* colony or infection, it is very difficult to cure. Because of this, prevention is very important. If a doctor prescribes an antibiotic, the patient should make sure to take all of the medicine just as the doctor said. Failure to do this might allow the bacteria to develop a new resistance to that antibiotic. Infections are treated on a case-by-case basis.