

### **Invasive Group A Streptococcus in the Downtown Eastside**

Vancouver Coastal Health is currently investigating an **increase in cases of invasive Group A Streptococcus (GAS) infections in residents of the DTES.**

Over 40 cases have been identified since December 2019, primarily through positive blood cultures reported by St. Paul's Hospital Medical Microbiology. Cases are predominantly adult males and a high proportion of cases have required hospitalization. Many of the patients are homeless, inject drugs, and have presented to hospital with severe cellulitis. Some patients sought medical attention late in their illness course, such as after the onset of toxic shock syndrome, and three patients have died. At this time, cases do not appear to be connected but the investigation is still ongoing.

GAS bacteria can be found in the nose and throat or on the skin. They can be transmitted from person to person through respiratory droplets, such as coughing, but they can also be spread through close contact such as kissing or sharing cigarettes.

Most GAS infections are mild, resulting in simple cellulitis, "strep throat", or other easily treatable infections. However, GAS can also lead to severe invasive infections, including **bacteremia, necrotizing fasciitis, and toxic shock syndrome.** Diagnosis is made by culturing GAS from a normally sterile site.

#### **When seeing patients with symptoms compatible with GAS infection:**

- Please consider early empiric antibiotic therapy (such as cephalexin)
- If purulent, collect a wound culture before starting antibiotics
- Patients presenting with progressive or severe infections require prompt referral to the emergency department for management, especially if a severe infection is suspected

#### **In order to prevent GAS, patients should:**

- Maintain good hand hygiene and wash hands often
- Maintain good skin integrity and avoid practices that may result in open skin wounds
- Keep wounds clean and watch for signs of infection around the area
- Seek medical attention when wounds appear infected
- Avoid sharing bottles, eating utensils, cigarettes, or other items that may have come in contact with saliva
- Cough and sneeze into an elbow or sleeve, or into a tissue that can be thrown away
- Use sterile supplies and technique when injecting (avoiding contamination with saliva) and do not share injecting equipment with others

If you have additional questions, please call VCH Communicable Diseases at 604-675-3900 and ask to speak with a Public Health Nurse or the Medical Health Officer on call.

You can reach a Medical Health Officer in Vancouver at 604.675.3900 Toll free at 1.855.675.3900  
For public health emergencies after hours contact the Medical Health Officer on call at 604.527.4893

Vancouver Medical Health Officers

Dr. Patricia Daly (Chief Medical Health Officer)

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