

ANDREW J. SPANO, Westchester County Executive
JOSHUA LIPSMAN, M.D., J.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of Health
VICTORIA HOCHMAN and DONNA GREENE, Directors of Communications

CONTACT: Caren Halbfinger

(914) 813-5013
(914) 813-5000 (After Hours)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 19, 2009

TUBERCULOSIS CASES ARE UP
Health Department works to prevent TB from spreading

The Westchester County Health Department reported today that 62 Westchester residents had tuberculosis in 2008, up from 44 in 2007. Apart from New York City, Westchester County has the second highest number of residents with tuberculosis and the second highest case rates of tuberculosis in the state.

“We are doing a great deal, but Westchester still has one of the highest rates of TB among all counties in New York State, outside of New York City,” said Dr. Joshua Lipsman, Commissioner of Health for Westchester County. “The diversity of our TB patient population underscores the point that just about anyone can work or go to school alongside a person with active tuberculosis, so all residents should discuss the need for a TB skin test with their doctors. Because health care workers routinely care for patients at increased risk of getting TB, it is particularly important for them to obtain treatment when they test positive for TB.”

Westchester residents diagnosed with tuberculosis come from a wide range of ethnic, racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. In 2008, Westchester residents with TB have included three preschool-age children, who likely were infected by adult relatives in their homes, two college students, along with bus drivers, retail store and restaurant workers, housekeepers, and people employed in schools and in the healthcare field.

From 1999 through 2007, an average of 59 new TB cases were diagnosed each year in Westchester, with most cases occurring among foreign-born residents.

Although the numbers of TB cases in Westchester and the U.S. are low compared with most countries, the disease knows no borders and an increase in global travel has put all populations at increased risk.

Tuberculosis is a disease caused by a bacterium that is usually spread when an infected person coughs. TB usually infects the lungs, but it can also affect other parts of the body. Symptoms can include weakness, fatigue, nausea, weight loss, fever, and night sweats. Persistent coughing, chest pain, or coughing up blood might be symptoms of TB of

MORE

the lungs. In most cases, the patient must take multiple medications for many months. If left untreated, TB can be fatal.

Because TB is relatively uncommon in the United States, there is often a delay in diagnosing and treating the disease. During this delay, the infection can spread to others. People who are exposed to someone with active tuberculosis and who become infected often feel well, and generally do not become ill immediately (this stage is called latent infection). It often takes months or years before the tuberculosis infection spreads inside the body and causes illness (this stage is called active infection). Treatment of the latent or inactive infection prevents progression to active tuberculosis.

“Our Health Department will keep working to limit the exposure of county residents to this contagious disease and to reduce its spread by vigilantly monitoring, tracking and treating all cases,” Dr. Lipsman said.

Anyone with active tuberculosis can spread the disease to those around them. Through its TB Clinics, the Health Department provides free medical care and medications to anyone with tuberculosis. The Westchester County Department of Health follows up with every person in the county who has active TB to make sure that patients are appropriately treated and do not spread the infection to others.

Health Department TB Program staffers are charged with quickly identifying and treating those with active TB, as well as aggressively tracking down and assessing any people who may have been exposed.

In 2008, the Health Department held 55 on-site testing events at workplaces, schools, healthcare facilities and social and faith-based settings for everyone who had been exposed to a person with infectious tuberculosis. Of these, 41 testing events were held at hospitals, clinics and medical offices, requiring the evaluation of nearly 600 people.

Every household member for every resident with tuberculosis also was evaluated for tuberculosis infection. The goal of these investigations is to identify those with active or inactive latent infection and ensure that they are appropriately treated to prevent them from spreading the infection or becoming ill.

This includes making sure that individuals with infectious tuberculosis do not go to work, attend school or go to other places where they may spread the infection to others. To further ensure that residents with infectious tuberculosis successfully complete their prescribed course of treatment, the Health Department’s Tuberculosis Program uses directly observed therapy (DOT). In 2008, health department staff made 6210 visits to the 62 cases and many of their contacts to observe them taking their medications. These Health Department staffers also educated these residents about the disease and taught them how to keep from spreading it.

For more information about tuberculosis, or the tuberculin skin test, call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000 or visit the Health Department website at www.westchestergov.com/health.