

First Sexual Transmission of Typhoid Outbreak Documented

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.c The Associated Press

ATLANTA (April 25) - Health officials say they have documented the nation's first sexually transmitted outbreak of typhoid fever, a rare disease usually spread through tainted food and water.

A Cincinnati man passed typhoid to seven other men in the city who had sex with him last summer, federal researchers said Wednesday. It is treatable with antibiotics, but is occasionally fatal for victims who do not seek treatment.

Typhoid is most often transmitted by swallowing food and water contaminated with human feces, which harbors a type of salmonella that causes the disease. But health officials found that none of the Cincinnati men shared food or drink.

The disease likely circulated by highly risky oral-anal contact among the men, said Megan Reller, an epidemiologist with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC labeled typhoid a sexually transmitted disease for the first time at a conference in Atlanta this week, urging infected patients to stop all sexual contact until they are clear of the disease.

Judith Wasserheit, STD prevention chief at the CDC, said the discovery was disturbing but not necessarily surprising.

"We are seeing substantial increases in sexually transmitted diseases among men who have sex with men in multiple locations across this country," she said.

Typhoid is marked by high fever, weakness, headache and, in some cases, flat, red spots on the skin.

About 400 cases are reported annually in the United States, four-fifths of them traced to overseas travel. Typhoid is preventable by a vaccine recommended to Americans who visit developing nations.

CDC investigators said the Cincinnati man spread typhoid last summer after catching it during a visit to Puerto Rico in May. It is unclear how he originally contracted the disease, Reller said.

The man then passed the disease to seven male sex partners, she said. An eighth man from Indianapolis caught typhoid after visiting him for the weekend, but said the two did not have sex. How he got typhoid is unclear.

The CDC alerted health departments nationwide of the outbreak in August. The men were uncooperative with health officials, making it impossible to estimate how many other men might have been exposed, Reller said.

"Getting the sexual histories from these patients was very difficult," she said. "What I am sure of is that I do not know the full story of how many contacts the other patients had."

AP-NY-04-25-01 1742EDT

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