

6/4/2009

HEALTH ALERT

Cocaine contamination threatens local users

Additive destroys white blood cells causing serious illness

KING COUNTY, WA – At least three individuals have reported to local hospitals with a life threatening illness, likely caused by the use of cocaine contaminated with a drug used to treat animals. Called **levamisole**, the contaminant critically reduces a person's white blood cells, causing a condition known as agranulocytosis, where the affected person loses ability to fight infection. Levamisole contamination of some cocaine has previously been reported across the United States, Canada, and globally.

Patients with this condition in Seattle had life threatening infections requiring hospitalization and intensive care unit admittance. One individual needed extensive surgery, and another resulted in a hospitalization cost that exceeded \$100,000.

While investigation of illnesses possibly caused by cocaine contaminated with levamisole is on-going, Public Health – Seattle & King County and partners at the King County Department of Community and Human Services, hospitals, and other agencies are taking steps now to warn users of this potentially fatal mixture.

"Cocaine is already an extremely dangerous drug, and with our knowledge that local supply may be contaminated, it's even more urgent that people stop taking it," said Dr. David Fleming, Director and Health Officer for Public Health – Seattle & King County. "You can't tell if the cocaine or crack is contaminated with levamisole by looking at it. Don't take a chance and risk your life."

Levamisole is likely added to the cocaine product at the point of production outside of the United States, though it is not understood why. It can seriously reduce a person's white blood cells, suppressing immune function and the body's ability to fight off even minor infections. People who snort, smoke, or inject crack or powder cocaine contaminated by levamisole can develop overwhelming, rapidly developing, and life threatening infections.

Symptoms in persons using cocaine contaminated with levamisole include:

- High fever, chills or weakness
- Swollen glands
- Infections or sores in the mouth, skin, or anus
- White coating of the mouth, tongue or throat (thrush)
- Pneumonia, which includes cough, fever, and shortness of breath

Persons using cocaine and experiencing any of these symptoms should seek medical attention at an emergency room or other medical provider immediately.

Cocaine causes overdose and death every year in King County. At this point, investigators are unsure whether there have been any local deaths or other significant illnesses caused by cocaine adulterated with levamisole.

From Public Health – Seattle King County

To report possible cases in Thurston County, call 360-786-5470