



May 7, 2018

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Community meeting to address spike in syphilis cases in Coachella Valley

Riverside County health officials are collaborating with medical providers, community groups and others to tackle the surge of syphilis cases in the region, particularly in the Coachella Valley, where the rate of infection is nearly three times the rate countywide.

The Riverside County Syphilis Community Collaborative will hold its inaugural meeting at 1:30 p.m. May 15 at the Demuth Community Center in Palm Springs, 3601 E. Mesquite Ave.

“We’ve reached a critical point with the number of syphilis infections and the public health department can’t fix this by ourselves,” said Dr. Cameron Kaiser, county public health officer, who will lead the meeting. “For all the programs we offer, more needs to be done and for that we need the community’s help.”

The spread of syphilis has been a growing concern in California and nationally for several years. In Riverside County, the rate is about 12 cases per 100,000 population, according to the latest figures. However, the rate for the Coachella Valley is 32 per 100,000, and in Palm Springs that figure is well over 100 cases per 100,000.

The meeting is part of RUHS-Public Health's "Spotlight on Syphilis (S.O.S.)" campaign to bring attention to the ongoing spike in cases. Future community forums will take place throughout Riverside County.

By sharing information and ideas, health officials hope they can come up with achievable strategies and goals, even as funding for public health and health care is shrinking.

"We are all dealing with tight budgets and resources, so it makes sense to combine resources and work together," said Kim Saruwatari, director of Public Health. "At this point the health issues facing the community are secondary to the costs."

Syphilis stats:

- North Palm Springs has the highest rate of syphilis in Riverside County at 185 cases per 100,000 population.
- Men make up more than 90 percent of all syphilis cases in Riverside County.
- While Whites make up the highest number of syphilis cases in the Coachella Valley, Blacks have the highest rate of infection at 67.1 per 100,000 population.

For more information, go to www.rivcoph.org