

Increase in *Shigella* cases among Toronto males

A cluster of *Shigella* cases among males living in Toronto has recently been identified. Thirteen cases of shigellosis due to infection with *Shigella flexneri*, and two cases with an unspecified *Shigella* species, have been reported to Toronto Public Health (TPH) since the beginning of November, 2009. All 15 cases were male, with a mean and median age of 39 years; 12 (80%) of the cases live in the downtown area.

Although infection with *Shigella* is more commonly reported among males in Toronto, the number of cases in the last two months is disproportionately high in this group. The proportion of cases resulting from infection with *S. flexneri* is also much higher than previously reported. Six of the cases reported engaging in sexual activity (oral-anal contact) as the main risk for infection.

Shigella bacteria can be transmitted through ingestion of contaminated food or water, or passed from person-to-person, typically through sexual contact. A low infectious dose is sufficient to cause infection. Symptoms of shigellosis usually begin within one to three days after being exposed to the bacterium. Infection can cause diarrhea (which may be bloody), fever, nausea, and vomiting, and illness can last from four to 14 days. The very young and elderly and those with compromised immune systems are at higher risk for complications and may experience more severe and longer lasting diarrhea.

Toronto Public Health is requesting clinicians to consider shigellosis in the differential diagnosis of those presenting with gastroenteritis, inquire about recent sexual activity as a possible risk factor and request the appropriate diagnostic testing (stool culture). Patients with symptoms should be advised to refrain from sexual activity that may cause transmission of infection to others as well as food preparation for others for the duration of illness. *Shigella* can be carried asymptomatically and persons who engage in sexual activity that could expose them or their partners to fecal material should be counselled to wash their hands and genital/anal areas thoroughly before and after engaging in sexual activity. Use of protective barrier equipment also reduces the risk of enteric sexually transmitted infections.

Shigellosis is a reportable communicable disease. Please report all suspect and confirmed cases of shigellosis to Toronto Public Health immediately by calling 416-392-7411 (during work hours) and 416-690-2142 (after hours).

For more information see the TPH fact sheet and background materials on shigellosis at: <http://www.toronto.ca/health/cdc/factsheets/shigellosis.htm#04>