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Department of Health Investigates Unusual Condition that Harms Immune System Potential Cocaine Contamination Could Be Cause

(Santa Fe) – The New Mexico Department of Health is investigating 11 New Mexico cases of agranulocytosis (*uh-gran-yuh-loh-sahy-toh-sis*), which leaves patients unable to fight off infections. The unusual condition can be fatal because it compromises the immune system. It appears that the condition could be related to using cocaine that is contaminated with levamisole.

At least five of the patients used cocaine. Levamisole, a medication used to deworm animals and treat certain conditions in people, may be the cause of agranulocytosis in the patients who used cocaine. One of the patients who used cocaine and had levamisole in his system died.

Almost half of all of the cases are from Bernalillo County. The remaining cases are from Santa Fe, Sandoval, McKinley, Grant and San Miguel counties. Patients' age range is from 26 to 72. The Department is also working with the Colorado Department of Health and Environment and the Arizona Department of Health Services to investigate two cases of agranulocytosis in people who use cocaine from those states.

The Department of Health's Scientific Laboratory identified levamisole in other people who used cocaine. The Scientific Lab has also identified levamisole in cocaine samples obtained by law enforcement. The Department does not know why this medication is being found in cocaine.

The U.S. Department of Justice reported that between January and April 2008, levamisole found in tested cocaine had increased from 9 percent to 19 percent. Health officials in Canada are investigating a number of cases of agranulocytosis in people who use cocaine. They have also identified levamisole in one of their cases.

Physicians and pathologists at the University of New Mexico Hospital and TriCore Reference Laboratories in Albuquerque notified the Department of Health about the cases after noticing several cases of this rare condition over a short period of time. The Department of Health continues to collaborate with the institutions on the investigation.

The Department is alerting health care providers to the Department's investigation and is advising complete blood tests on people who use cocaine and have infections. Physicians should call the Department's on-call epidemiologist at 505-827-0006 if they suspect cases. The Department can provide guidance on testing patients for levamisole on a case by case basis.

The Department advises people who use cocaine and have infections to seek medical care as soon as possible. Symptoms of agranulocytosis include:

- Worsening or persistent sore throat
- Persistent or recurrent fever
- Swollen glands
- Painful sores (mouth, anal)
- Skin infection, especially if associated with painful swelling
- Thrush (a white fungal coating of the mouth, tongue or throat)
- Other unusual infections

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