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### **State Health Officer: “Healthcare-associated infections are serious; preventable”**

Healthcare-associated infections (HAI) are on the increase across the country according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources has ramped up efforts to help healthcare facilities and healthcare providers combat the issue.

HAI are a threat to patient safety. Patients may get infections in healthcare facilities while they are being treated for something else. Commissioner for Public Health and State Health Officer Dr. Marian Swinker says, “All healthcare-associated infections are serious, yet preventable in many instances. The Bureau for Public Health’s Office of Epidemiology and Prevention Services (OEPS) has a HAI coordinator who works with healthcare facilities across the state to help prevent these infections by offering education, training and prevention materials. Common healthcare procedures may leave patients vulnerable to germs that can cause healthcare-associated infections, so preventive actions are needed.”

Dr. Swinker says that hospitals and healthcare facilities employ many types of invasive devices and procedures to treat patients and to help them recover. Infections can be associated with the devices used in medical procedures, such as catheters or ventilators. HAI can include central line-associated bloodstream infections, catheter-associated urinary tract infections, and ventilator associated pneumonia. Even the antibiotics used for needed or life-saving treatments can lead to problems by fostering the growth of populations of antibiotic-resistant organisms. These develop when powerful antibiotics kill off the more susceptible bacteria, selecting for the stronger bacteria. One example is Carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae or CRE. CDC reported this month that CRE infections are on the rise. As many as 4% of U.S. hospitals had at least one CRE infection last year; about 18% of long-term acute care facilities had one. Some CRE bacteria have become resistant to most available antibiotics. Infections with these germs are very difficult to treat, and can be deadly. According to CDC, death may occur in as high as 50% of patients who become infected.

Last year in WV, there were 176 outbreaks investigated by OEPS. Of these, 111 outbreaks involved HAI, affecting 2,938 people. Ten of the outbreaks involved multiple drug-resistant organisms; three of these were CRE. According to Dr. Swinker, “Healthy people usually do not get CRE infections. In healthcare settings, CRE infections most commonly occur among patients who are receiving treatment for other conditions. If an outbreak or cluster of CRE does occur, the condition is reportable to the state.” WV’s reportable disease rule requires that any infectious disease of unusual occurrence or public health importance be reported within 24 hours. This category would include some healthcare-associated infections.

Dr. Swinker says there are steps both the provider and patient can take to reduce the risk of HAI. She says, “Patients can be proactive by talking to their doctor about their concerns for infections. You can ask a provider to wash their hands, or inquire whether the needle, syringe, or vial used for your procedure is new. You can inform your doctor if you have severe diarrhea, or a skin infection near a surgical site or catheter site.”

For providers, Dr. Swinker says, “Follow your written prevention policies and procedures and ensure that staff understand infection control practices. Have someone on staff trained in, and paying attention to, infection prevention. Ensure that you have supplies available to adhere to Standard Precautions. Hand hygiene, proper preparation of skin sites for line insertions, and general environmental cleaning can go a long way in reducing the spread of infection. Antibiotic use should be limited to situations when it is clearly needed and likely to be effective. For example, antibiotics that kill or control bacteria are not useful for infections caused by viruses. Antibiotics should be given when needed, but overuse or misuse can lead to increased bacterial resistance without providing any benefit to the patient.”

To learn more about HAI prevention go to <http://www.dhhr.wv.gov/oeps/disease/hai/Pages/default.aspx>.