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14 September 2024

Dear Doctor,

Vigilance against Invasive Group B Streptococcus Infection

I would like to draw your attention to the recent upsurge of invasive Group B Streptococcus (GBS) infections in Hong Kong and enlist your support in the prevention of the disease.

Hong Kong recorded a large cluster of more than 50 cases of invasive GBS belonging to serotype III sequence type 283 (ST283) in 2021 summer¹ and another small cluster of eight invasive GBS ST283 cases in the summer of 2023.² The then investigations found that the infections were associated with contact of raw freshwater fish or consumption of undercooked freshwater fish. Recent surveillance data revealed an increasing trend in the number of invasive GBS cases since mid-August 2024. The Centre for Health Protection (CHP) immediately conducted genome sequencing of the cases in collaboration with the Hospital Authority and the results available so far showed that 27 of them were ST283. The CHP's laboratory analysis of some of the samples is still in progress.

The CHP's epidemiological investigation showed that these 27 patients with ST283 infections involved ten males and 17 females aged between 53 and 88 (median: 70), residing in 18 districts throughout the territory. Among them, 20 patients have underlying illnesses. The patients mainly presented with sepsis, septic arthritis, meningitis and urinary tract infection. Regarding history of exposure, it was found that about 90% of them had contact with or handled raw freshwater fish prior to onset of their disease. Seven of them reported that they had wounds on their hands when handling raw freshwater fish, and no infected person reported having consumed freshwater fish sashimi.



¹ https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/cdw_v18_sp_bulletin.pdf

² https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/cdw_v19_10.pdf

ST283 is more virulent than other strains of GBS as it may cause invasive diseases (e.g. sepsis, septic arthritis, meningitis and infective endocarditis) in otherwise healthy adults or adults with relatively few underlying comorbidities. Association between consumption of raw freshwater fish and invasive GBS ST283 infection has been reported previously in overseas literature. In 2015, GBS ST283 caused a major invasive foodborne outbreak involving at least 146 people in Singapore. Epidemiological investigation showed that the outbreak had a strong link with the consumption of raw freshwater fish.

In regard to the current situation, we would like to seek your assistance in providing the following health advice to your patients. To prevent GBS ST283 infection, members of the public are reminded to maintain personal, food and environmental hygiene and should keep their hands clean and practise good wound care at all times, especially :

- Wear gloves when handling aquatic products and avoid direct contact with aquatic products or dirty water with bare hands; and wash hands thoroughly afterwards;
- When buying aquatic products, avoid direct contact with the aquatic products or use any towel provided by the stalls; wash hands with liquid soap and water as soon as possible if having contact with aquatic products which are not fully cooked;
- Do not eat any freshwater fish sashimi, raw or undercooked freshwater aquatic products; and
- Do not touch aquatic products directly whenever there is a wound on hands. If a wound is sustained during handling aquatic products, the wound must be cleaned immediately and properly covered with waterproof adhesive dressings.

Please draw the attention of healthcare professionals and supporting staff in your institution/ working with you to the above. Thank you for your unfailing support in the prevention and control of communicable diseases.

Yours faithfully,



(Dr. Albert Au)

for Controller, Centre for Health Protection
Department of Health