

Anthrax

Information for the Public

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a very rare disease. It is caused by a germ *Bacillus anthracis*. It can occur in wild and domestic hoofed animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, etc. It can also occur in humans.

Anthrax occurs when a person gets anthrax spores into a cut in their skin, or if they breathe in or swallow the spores. Anthrax can also occur if people inject drugs contaminated with anthrax spores. In 2001, people got anthrax from contaminated letters sent through the mail by an unknown criminal. This caused anthrax infections of the skin and lungs.

More recently, people have gotten anthrax by exposure to contaminated animal hides.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

- Cutaneous (skin): First, the skin starts to itch; a large sore appears; the sore becomes a black scab. If not treated, the infection may spread to the blood.
- Inhalation (lungs): Cough, fever and headache happen first; then, symptoms become severe with trouble breathing. Without treatment, people rapidly die of shock.
- Gastrointestinal (stomach and intestines): The illness starts with fever, abdominal pain, loose watery bowel movements. The abdomen becomes swollen and painful and the person develops shock and dies without treatment.
- Injectional (skin and soft tissues): After injection of illegal drugs, the person develops a skin and soft tissue infection. If the infection gets into the blood, the patient can develop shock and die.

How soon after exposure would symptoms begin?

Symptoms generally develop between 1 and 7 days after exposure, but incubation periods of 60 to 100 days are possible.

Can anthrax be spread from one person to another person?

Not ordinarily. Cutaneous (skin) anthrax could be spread by touching the sore.

Can anthrax be treated?

If given early in the illness, some antibiotics can treat anthrax. Intensive care is necessary for inhalation and gastrointestinal anthrax. Some new drugs are now available that counteract some of the most serious effects of anthrax such as tissue swelling and shock.

Cutaneous anthrax can be treated with oral antibiotics.

Division of Infectious Disease Epidemiology

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Should I worry about anthrax and bioterrorism?

No one can predict what a criminal might do. In the past, the individual risk of disease from bioterrorism has been very, very small in the United States.

What will be done to evaluate anthrax exposure?

Public health will work to find people who need to take antibiotics or vaccine and try to help them get the preventive treatments they need.

What will be done to evaluate a criminal terrorist incident?

State, local and federal public health agencies will also have to work with law enforcement and emergency management officials to assure that both public health and legal investigations can be completed.

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