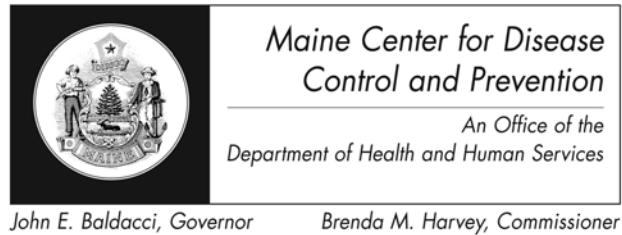


Anthrax

Fact Sheet



What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a disease caused by bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. These bacteria are found naturally in the soil and primarily infect cattle and other animals that feed on grass and plants (e.g. sheep, goats, horses, etc.). When the bacteria are outside the body, they can form a protective shell that allows them to survive for years in the environment. This is called the “spore” form of the bacteria.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

The symptoms of anthrax depend on how a person is exposed to the bacteria. The type of illness caused by anthrax also depends on how a person is exposed. There are three types of anthrax infections:

- **Cutaneous:** The first symptom is a small sore that develops into a blister. The blister then develops into a skin ulcer with a black area in the center. The sore, blister and ulcer do not hurt. Without treatment, death occurs in about 5-20% of infected people. With treatment, death is rare.
- **Gastrointestinal:** The first symptoms are nausea, loss of appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever, followed by bad stomach pain. Intestinal anthrax results in death in 25% to 60% of cases.
- **Inhalation:** The first symptoms of inhalation anthrax are like cold or flu symptoms and can include a sore throat, mild fever and muscle aches. Later symptoms include cough, chest discomfort, shortness of breath, tiredness and muscle aches. (Caution: Do not assume that just because a person has cold or flu symptoms that they have inhalation anthrax). Inhalation anthrax is usually fatal.

How soon do infected people get sick?

Symptoms can appear within 7 days of coming in contact with the bacteria for all three types of anthrax. For inhalation anthrax, symptoms can appear within a week or can take up to 60 days to appear.

How is anthrax spread?

Anthrax is not known to spread from person to person. Humans become infected with anthrax:

- when an anthrax spore enters a cut or break in the skin
- by eating undercooked meat from infected animals, or
- by breathing in the anthrax spore

Humans can come into contact with anthrax by handling wool or other animal products from infected animals. Naturally occurring cases of anthrax are very rare in the United States.

Anthrax spores could be used as a biological weapon by terrorists. During the anthrax attacks in 2001, people got anthrax from handling contaminated mail. There is concern that the bacteria could be released into the air in a crowded area, which could result in many cases of the most serious form of anthrax that occurs when anthrax spores are breathed in.

How is anthrax diagnosed?

Anthrax is diagnosed when a laboratory finds the bacteria or specific markers of the bacteria in a sample of a person’s blood, skin sore, or respiratory secretions.

How is anthrax treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat all three types of anthrax. Early identification and treatment are important.

Treatment after infection. Treatment is usually a 60-day course of antibiotics. Success depends on the type of anthrax and how soon treatment begins.

Prevention after exposure. Treatment is different for a person who is exposed to anthrax, but is not yet sick. Healthcare providers may use antibiotics combined with the anthrax vaccine to prevent anthrax infection.

Can anthrax be prevented?

If a person is known to have been exposed to anthrax (breathed in the anthrax spores, ate contaminated meat, or spores got into a cut or break in the skin), it may be possible to prevent the disease by starting treatment with antibiotics quickly.

Is there a vaccine against anthrax?

Yes, but it is primarily given to military personnel. Vaccination is only recommended for those at high risk, such as workers in research laboratories that handle anthrax bacteria routinely.

Should I keep antibiotics on hand just in case of an anthrax attack?

No. Inappropriately using or storing antibiotics can be harmful to you and to the community. In an emergency, state and federal health officials can ship antibiotics from their stockpiles to wherever they are needed.

If a person has anthrax, do they need to stay out of work or school?

No. Anthrax is not known to spread from person to person. If a person has an anthrax skin infection, they should follow their medical provider's instructions closely for caring for the wound.

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to anthrax?

Contact local law enforcement immediately if you think that you may have been intentionally exposed to anthrax. This includes being exposed to a suspicious package or envelope that contains powder. If you believe you have been exposed and you are experiencing signs of anthrax, seek medical attention immediately.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.