

Anthrax Fact Sheet



October 2017 • Information for Pierce County Residents

Communicable Disease Division
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What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious but rare disease caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. It is capable of forming spores that can survive in the environment for long periods of time. There are three types of anthrax: skin (cutaneous), lungs (inhalation), and digestive (gastrointestinal).

How do people become infected with anthrax?

Although anthrax is generally a disease of cows or sheep, humans occasionally become infected by handling products from infected animals or by breathing in anthrax spores from infected animal products (like wool or skin). They can also get gastrointestinal anthrax by eating undercooked meat from infected animals.

If people have intentionally been exposed, as in a bioterrorist release, breathing in the spores is the most likely route of infection (leading to disease in the lungs).

How likely is it that I have actually been exposed to anthrax?

That depends on how and where the anthrax was released, and how close you were to the release site. A public health professional may interview you or provide you with information to help determine your likelihood of exposure.

What are the signs and symptoms of anthrax?

- *Cutaneous*: The first symptom is a small sore that develops into a blister. The blister then becomes a skin ulcer with a black center. The sore, blister, and ulcer do not hurt.
- *Gastrointestinal*: The first symptoms are nausea, loss of appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever. These symptoms are followed by stomach pain.
- *Inhalation*: The first symptoms are like cold/flu symptoms: sore throat, mild fever, and muscle aches. Later symptoms include cough, chest discomfort, shortness of breath, tiredness, and muscle aches.

How soon after exposure will I have symptoms?

Symptoms can appear within seven days of coming into contact with the bacterium for all three types of anthrax. For inhalation anthrax, symptoms can appear within a week or take as long as 42 days to appear.

If there is even a small chance that you were exposed to *B. anthracis*, you should watch for symptoms. Contact your doctor and either Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department or Washington State Department of Health immediately if you develop any of these symptoms. Be sure to tell them that you may have been exposed to anthrax spores.

How do I know if I need medication now?

You will be given antibiotics now as a preventive measure *if* it is determined that you were likely exposed to *B. anthracis*. You will be given verbal and written instructions explaining how and when to take the antibiotics and what to do if you become ill. All of the medication you are given must be taken.

Do I need to worry about infecting others?

Anthrax is not known to spread from one person to another. There is a very small chance that drainage from an open sore on someone with skin anthrax can cause infection.

Who do I call if I have questions or concerns?

You may call your healthcare provider or Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department at (253) 798-6500 (ask for a communicable disease control nurse).

Where else can I find information?

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: www.cdc.gov
- Washington State Department of Health (DOH) website: www.doh.wa.gov