

ANTHRAX FACT SHEET

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is an infection caused by the bacteria *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax can be found naturally in soil and commonly affects domestic and wild animals around the world; however, it is rare in the United States. Infection with anthrax can occur in three forms, depending on the way you are exposed: 1) cutaneous (skin) anthrax, 2) inhalation anthrax, and 3) gastrointestinal anthrax. Cutaneous anthrax is the most common form and inhalation anthrax is the most deadly.

Who can get anthrax?

Anyone. However, the following persons are at increased risk:

- Persons who handle animal products (such as wool, hides, or fur)
- Veterinarians
- Livestock producers
- Travelers visiting agricultural regions of Central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa, central and southwestern Asia, southern and eastern Europe, and the Caribbean
- Laboratory professionals
- Persons who may be exposed during bioterrorist events, such as mail handlers and military personnel

How do people get anthrax?

The bacteria that cause anthrax produce spores, an inactive form that must be “activated.” People get infected when spores get into the body and become “activated.” This can happen when you breathe in spores, eat food or drink water that is contaminated with spores, or get spores in a cut or scrape in the skin. When anthrax spores get inside the body, the bacteria can multiply, spread out in the body, produce toxins (poisons), and cause severe illness. Cutaneous anthrax infections may occur from skin contact with contaminated animal carcasses, wool, hides, or fur. Inhalation anthrax infections may occur from breathing in

spores that may have been aerosolized either by processing or working with spore-contaminated animal products.

Gastrointestinal anthrax may result from eating undercooked meat from infected animals or from ingesting aerosolized spores.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

Cutaneous anthrax symptoms can include a group of small blisters or bumps that may itch, swelling around the sore, and a painless skin sore with a black center that appears after the small blisters or bumps. Most often the sore will be on the face, neck, arms, or hands. Inhalation anthrax symptoms can include fever and chills, chest discomfort, shortness of breath, confusion or dizziness, cough, nausea, vomiting or stomach pains, headache, sweats, extreme tiredness, and bodyaches. Gastrointestinal anthrax symptoms can include fever and chills, swelling of the neck or neck glands, sore throat, painful swallowing, hoarseness, nausea and vomiting, especially bloody vomiting, diarrhea (may be bloody), headache, red face and eyes, stomach pain, fainting, and swelling of the stomach.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Depending on the form, symptoms can take anywhere from 1 day to more than 2 months to appear.

Is there a vaccine for anthrax?

Yes. The vaccine is currently available to persons at high risk for exposure, such as military personnel, certain laboratory workers, and some people who handle animals or animal products.

How is anthrax treated?

Anthrax can be treated with antibiotics. After anthrax toxins have been released in the body, antitoxin is another treatment that can be given. If someone has symptoms of anthrax, it is important to get medical care as quickly as possible to have the best chances of a full recovery. Patients with serious cases will need to be hospitalized.



Could anthrax be used as a biological weapon?

Yes. Anthrax is one of the most likely agents to be used in a biological attack. It only takes a small amount of anthrax to infect a large number of people and it can be released quietly and without anyone knowing.

How can anthrax be prevented?

Some ways to prevent anthrax exposure when working with animal hides include working in a well-ventilated space, covering exposed skin, avoiding touching your face with your hands, and using appropriate personal protective equipment. Travelers need to be careful about what they

eat and handle, the souvenirs they bring home, avoid eating raw or undercooked meat, and avoid contact with livestock, animal products and animal carcasses. Antibiotics can prevent anthrax from developing in people who have been exposed but have not developed symptoms.

Where can I get more information?

Information about anthrax and other related health topics can be found at www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit www.doh.dc.gov or call (202) 442-9371.



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
Center for Policy, Planning, and Evaluation
Division of Epidemiology—Disease Surveillance and Investigation
899 N. Capitol Street, NE, Suite 580, Washington, D.C. 20002
www.doh.dc.gov

