



Fact Sheet: Anthrax

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What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis*, a type of bacteria that forms spores. Anthrax usually occurs in animals such as cattle, sheep, horses, and goats. It has been rare in humans within the United States. There are three types of anthrax – skin (cutaneous), lung (inhalation-deadliest form), and digestive (gastrointestinal).

How do people get infected with anthrax?

The bacteria that cause anthrax are usually found in soil. They can live as spores for many years, but naturally occurring cases of anthrax are rare.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

The symptoms of anthrax are different depending on the type of infection.

- **Skin (cutaneous):** The first symptom is a raised bump. Within 2 to 6 days, it develops into a blistered sore and then a painless ulcer with a characteristic black area in the center. Lymph glands in the area near the wound may swell
- **Lung (inhalation):** Early symptoms of inhalation anthrax are like cold or flu symptoms (sore throat, cough, mild fever, and malaise or chest pain). Symptoms progress over 3-4 days to include respiratory distress, hypoxemia, stridor, severe dyspnea, diaphoresis, shock, and cyanosis
- **Digestive (gastrointestinal):** Early symptoms include nausea, vomiting, and stomach pain, followed by fever and signs of septicemia

Can anthrax be spread from person to person?

While anthrax is not contagious, in rare cases, person-to-person transmission has been reported with cutaneous anthrax, where discharges from skin lesions might be infectious. Contacts of people sick with anthrax do not need to be treated unless they were also exposed to the same source of infection.

How is anthrax treated?

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

After infection, treatment is usually a 60-day course of antibiotics in combination with post exposure vaccination. Success depends on the type of anthrax infection and how soon treatment begins.

Is there an anthrax vaccine?

Yes. There is a vaccine for anthrax. It's only given as preventative measure to people in the military and other individuals (laboratory workers or veterinarians) who are at high risk for coming into contact with anthrax through their work.

The vaccine has not been evaluated for safety and efficacy in children younger than 18 years or in adults 65 years or older. Civilian doctors do not have access to the anthrax vaccine.

How dangerous is the anthrax threat?

In 2001, anthrax was deliberately spread through the United States Postal Service by sending letters with powder containing anthrax. Anthrax is classified as a Category A agent by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Category A agents are considered the highest threat to national security, due to their ease of transmission and high rate of death or serious illness.