

FactSheet

Para Su Información

Anthrax

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is an infectious disease caused by the spore-forming bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax most commonly occurs in livestock, but can also infect humans. *B. anthracis* is on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) list of possible bioterrorism agents.

How is anthrax spread?

Anthrax infection can occur in three forms: cutaneous (skin), inhalation, and intestinal. *B. anthracis* spores can live in the soil for many years and humans can become infected with anthrax by handling animal products from infected animals or by inhaling anthrax spores. Anthrax can also be spread by eating undercooked meat from infected animals. Direct person-to-person spread of anthrax is unlikely.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

Cutaneous: Most anthrax infections occur when the bacteria enter a cut or abrasion on the skin. Skin infection begins as a raised itchy bump that resembles an insect bite but within 1-2 days develops into a blister and then a painless ulcer, with a characteristic black area of dead tissue in the center. Lymph glands in the adjacent area may swell. Some cases of untreated cutaneous anthrax may result in death, although deaths are rare with appropriate antimicrobial therapy.

Inhalation: Initial symptoms may resemble the flu. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing problems and shock. Untreated inhalation anthrax usually results in death in 1-2 days after onset of severe symptoms.

Intestinal: The intestinal disease form of anthrax may follow the consumption of contaminated meat and causes inflammation of the intestinal tract. Initial signs of nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting, and/or fever are followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.

Is there a treatment for anthrax?

Doctors can prescribe antibiotics for anthrax. To be effective, treatment should be started early. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal.

Is there a vaccine for anthrax?

Although there is a vaccine for anthrax, it is not currently available to the general public. Because there is a limited supply of vaccine, its use has been restricted to those persons at greatest risk for anthrax, i.e. military personnel, some veterinarians and researchers studying anthrax.

Should I buy a gas mask?

Purchasing a gas mask is not currently recommended for these reasons:

- If an attack occurs, the types of agents and concentrations are unknown and therefore it is almost impossible to accurately select a mask.
- Gas masks may reduce, but do not eliminate exposure to chemical or biological agents. They do not eliminate the risk of infection.
- There may be no obvious warning in the event of a biological or chemical attack, so you would not be able to determine when to put the mask on.
- Gas masks may help protect your lungs, however, some chemical agents may be absorbed through the skin or eyes.

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- Negative pressure masks can be dangerous for children or people with respiratory problems.

Should I have my own supply of antibiotics?

There is currently no justification for stockpiling antibiotics. Antibiotics could cause side effects and should only be taken with medical supervision. There are a number of different germs a bioterrorist might use to carry out an attack. Many antibiotics are effective for a variety of diseases, but there isn't one antibiotic that is effective against all diseases. Thus, no single pill can protect against all types of biological weapon attacks. Keeping a supply of antibiotics on hand poses other problems because the antibiotics have a limited "shelf life" before they lose their strength.

How can I protect my family or myself?

Local, state and federal government agencies have been active in preparing responses to chemical,

biological and nuclear threats. In the event of a credible anthrax threat, appropriate measures will be taken to protect the health of the public. Individuals are strongly cautioned against stockpiling antibiotics or self-medicating in order to prevent anthrax.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your doctor or the Southern Nevada Health District, Office of Epidemiology at (702) 759-1300. Additional information about anthrax can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website at <http://www.cdc.gov/anthrax/>.



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