

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Anthrax



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious infectious disease caused by the bacteria *Bacillus Anthracis*. Anthrax can be found naturally in soil and commonly affects domestic and wild animals around the world. Although rare, in the United States, people can get sick if they come into contact with it, usually through touching infected animals or contaminated animal products. The anthrax bacteria are very tough and can live in the environment for a long time. They form a protective shell, keeping them from being killed. Contact with anthrax can cause severe illness in both humans and animals. Anthrax is **not** contagious from person to person.

How do animals and humans become infected with anthrax?

Both domestic and wild animals can become infected when they breathe in or eat spores in contaminated soil, plants, or water. People get infected when spores get into the body through breathing them in, eating or drinking contaminated food and water, or get spores in a cut or scrape in the skin. It is very uncommon for people in the United States to get infected with anthrax. Most people who get sick from anthrax are exposed while working with infected animals or animal products such as wool, hides, or hair.

Where is anthrax found?

It is most common in regions of central and South America, sub-Saharan Africa, central and southwest Asia, southern and eastern Europe, and the Caribbean.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

The symptoms of anthrax depends on the type of infection, and can take anywhere from 1 day to more than 2 months to appear. All types of anthrax have the potential, if untreated, to spread throughout the body and cause severe illness and even death.

- **Cutaneous Anthrax:** Occurs when anthrax is introduced into the body through a cut on the skin. This is the most common form of infection and is the least dangerous. Infection usually develops within 1-7 days of exposure. Symptoms include: a group of small blisters or bumps that may itch, swelling around the sore, an ulcer 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:** Occurs when anthrax is breathed in. This is considered the most deadly form of anthrax. Infection usually starts anywhere from 1 week to 2 months after exposure. Symptoms include: fever and chills, chest discomfort, shortness of breath, confusion, cough, nausea and vomiting, headache, drenching sweats, extreme tiredness, body aches.
- **Gastrointestinal Anthrax:** Occurs when the anthrax virus is eaten. This is rarely reported in the United States. Symptoms include: fever and chills, swelling of the neck or neck glands, sore throat, painful swallowing, hoarseness, bloody diarrhea, red face and red eyes, swelling of stomach.
- **Injection:** Occurs when anthrax is deliberately injected into the bloodstream. This type of infection has never been reported in the United States. Symptoms include: Fever and chills; group of small blisters or bumps that may itch, appearing where the drug was injected; painless skin sore with a black center that appears after the blisters or bumps; swelling around the sore; abscesses deep under the skin or in the muscle where the drug was injected

How is anthrax treated?

Anthrax can be treated with antibiotics or antitoxin. Patients with serious cases will need to be hospitalized. Only people with confirmed cases of anthrax should be treated with antibiotics. In contrast, doctors may treat with antitoxins. This can be used if anthrax toxins have been released in the body. This form of treatment is used in addition to other treatment options, like antibiotics. Diagnosis of disease is confirmed with a blood test sent to a laboratory.

How can I prevent an anthrax infection?

Antibiotics can be used in people who have been exposed but not yet show symptoms to prevent the bacteria from growing. People should begin antibiotics within 60 days of being exposed to any anthrax spores, to prevent the spores from 'activating' and growing in the body.

There is a vaccine to prevent anthrax, but it is not typically available to the general public. It is used mostly for at-risk adults such as laboratory workers who work with anthrax, some people who handle animals or animal products such as some veterinarians, and some members of the United States military.

Where can I get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse, or clinic
- The Centers for disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov>
- The Burlington County Health Department at (609) 256-5548
- The New Jersey Department of Health at <http://nj.gov/health>