

# 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. Contact with anthrax can cause severe illness in both humans and animals. Anthrax is **not** contagious from person to person.

## 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.

## 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 dirt, plants, or water. People get infected when they breathe in or eat spores in contaminated dirt, plants, or 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.

## What are the symptoms of anthrax?

The symptoms of anthrax depend 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 gets into the body through a cut on the skin. This is the most common form of infection and is the least dangerous. Infection usually happens within 1-7 days of contact. 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 contact. 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. People with confirmed cases of anthrax should be treated with antibiotics. Sometimes doctors treat with antitoxins. They can be used if anthrax toxins have been released in the body and are usually used in addition to antibiotics.

## **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.

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>

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