

Fact Sheet: Anthrax

What is Anthrax?

Anthrax is a disease caused by spore-forming bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax occurs in warm-blooded animals, including humans. The three forms of human anthrax are: inhalation anthrax (rare), gastrointestinal anthrax (rare), and skin (cutaneous) anthrax (most common).

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms vary depending on how the disease was contracted. Symptoms usually occur within seven days of exposure for all three types of anthrax.

Inhalation anthrax:

- May resemble a cold (cough, fatigue, low-grade fever)
- May progress to respiratory distress and shock after a few days within 24-36 hours
- If untreated, usually results in death within 1-5 days after initial symptoms begin

Gastrointestinal anthrax:

- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Bloody diarrhea
- Fever

Followed by:

- Severe abdominal pain
- Vomiting of blood
- Severe diarrhea
- If untreated, usually results in death within 2-5 days after initial symptoms begin

Skin (Cutaneous) anthrax:

- Itchy bump that looks like an insect bite
- Blister-like lesion that eventually forms an ulcer with a black center within 7-10 days of initial lesion. The lesions are not painful.

How is it spread?

Anthrax is **NOT** spread from person to person and is thus not contagious. People get inhalation anthrax by inhaling spores from infected animal products (such as wool). Intestinal anthrax is spread by eating undercooked or raw meat products or dairy products of infected animals. Cutaneous anthrax is spread by direct skin contact with contaminated animals, animal products, or other contaminated objects. Anthrax can also be used as a weapon in bioterrorism (as in 2001 when anthrax was deliberately spread via the US postal system).

How is the disease treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat all three types of anthrax. When a case of anthrax is identified and reported, health authorities quickly conduct an investigation, determine the time and place of exposure, and identify those individuals who need treatment with antibiotics. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has stockpiled the antibiotics needed to treat large numbers of people. These supplies can be transported within hours.

How is it prevented?

Anthrax vaccine is available for people in high-risk occupations and is not available to the general public. Anthrax vaccine is not recommended for children under the age of 18.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information, call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.