

Anthrax

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a bacterial disease that most commonly affects animals such as cattle, pigs, sheep and goats. Anthrax bacteria form spores that can survive in the environment for long periods of time.

Humans seldom get anthrax but when they do it is through handling infected animals or other materials containing anthrax spores, eating infected meat or breathing in spores. Anthrax cannot be spread from person to person.

Types of anthrax and the symptoms

There are three types of anthrax and symptoms vary according to the how the infection occurred. Symptoms usually occur within one to seven days of exposure, but can take as long as 60 days to develop. Types of anthrax and their symptoms are:

- Inhalational anthrax — the most serious type of anthrax; caused by inhaling anthrax bacteria into the lungs. Early symptoms may resemble those of flu or a common cold: fever, cough, headache, chills, weakness, difficulty breathing and chest discomfort. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing problems and shock. This type of anthrax infection is often fatal if not treated promptly. In an intentional exposure, such as a bioterrorism event, breathing in the spores is the most likely route of exposure.
- Cutaneous anthrax — caused when anthrax bacteria make contact with cut or damaged skin. Early symptoms include an itchy bump. Later symptoms include a small blister, which becomes a painless sore with a black center. Lymph glands in the infected area may also swell.
- Gastrointestinal anthrax — caused by swallowing anthrax bacteria. It results in damage to the intestinal tract. Early symptoms include nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, and fever, followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.

Recognizing possible anthrax contamination

- If you have symptoms, consult a health care provider. If you believe you have been intentionally exposed to anthrax, you should contact law enforcement officials immediately.
- If you receive a letter or package that may contain anthrax:
 - Set the package down gently and leave it undisturbed to avoid release of spores into the air.
 - Immediately wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water.
 - Call 9-1-1 to report the incident. Follow the instructions of the 9-1-1 operators until help arrives.
 - Remember: Do not handle the package further unless necessary.

Treatment for anthrax

Antibiotics should be used to prevent or treat anthrax only under the direction of your health care provider or local health department. All forms of the disease need to be treated promptly. Since anthrax is not spread from person to person, there is no need to immunize or treat contacts of persons ill with anthrax, such as household members, friends, or coworkers, unless they were exposed to the same source of infection.



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