

CDC FACT SHEET

Anthrax

Anthrax: What You Need To Know

What Is Anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis*, a bacterium that forms spores. A bacterium is a very small organism made up of one cell. Many bacteria can cause disease. A spore is a cell that is dormant (asleep) but may come to life with the right conditions.

There are three types of anthrax:

- skin (cutaneous)
- lungs (inhalation)
- digestive (gastrointestinal)

How Do You Get It?

Anthrax is not known to spread from one person to another.

Anthrax from animals. Humans can become infected with anthrax by handling products from infected animals or by breathing in anthrax spores from infected animal products (like wool, for example). People also can become infected with gastrointestinal anthrax by eating undercooked meat from infected animals.

Anthrax as a weapon. Anthrax also can be used as a weapon. This happened in the United States in 2001. Anthrax was deliberately spread through the postal system by sending letters with powder containing anthrax. This caused 22 cases of anthrax infection.

How Dangerous Is Anthrax?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classifies agents with recognized bioterrorism potential into three priority areas (A, B and C). Anthrax is classified as a Category A agent. Category A agents are those that:

- pose the greatest possible threat for a bad effect on public health
- may spread across a large area or need public awareness
- need a great deal of planning to protect the public's health

In most cases, early treatment with antibiotics can cure cutaneous anthrax. Even if untreated, 80 percent of people who become infected with cutaneous anthrax do not die. Gastrointestinal anthrax is more serious because between one-fourth and more than half of cases lead to death. Inhalation anthrax is much more severe. In 2001, about half of the cases of inhalation anthrax ended in death.

What Are the Symptoms?

The symptoms (warning signs) of anthrax are different depending on the type of the disease:

- **Cutaneous:** The first symptom is a small sore that develops into a blister. The blister then develops into a skin ulcer with a black area in the center. The sore, blister and ulcer do not hurt.
- **Gastrointestinal:** The first symptoms are nausea, loss of appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever, followed by bad stomach pain.

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