



# South Central Public Health District

Prevent. Promote. Protect.

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## ANTHRAX AS A BIOTERRORISM EVENT

### What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a bacterium that can cause disease in humans and animals. Human anthrax has three major clinical forms: cutaneous, inhalational, and gastrointestinal. If left untreated, anthrax in all forms can lead to septicemia and death.

**Cutaneous anthrax** is the most common, naturally occurring type of infection and usually occurs after skin contact with contaminated meat, wool, hides, or leather from infected animals. The incubation period ranges from 1-12 days. The skin infection begins as a small raised bump. This bump progresses to a fluid-filled sore in 1-2 days and is followed by a black ulcer. The lesion is usually painless, but patients also may have fever, tiredness, headache, and enlarged lymph nodes. Deaths are rare if patients are given appropriate antimicrobial therapy.

**Inhalational anthrax** is the most lethal form of anthrax and results from inhaling a large number of spores of the bacteria. The incubation period of inhalational anthrax among humans is reported to range from 1 to 7 days, possibly ranging up to 60 days. Initial symptoms may resemble those of a common cold, such as sore throat, mild fever, muscle aches, and tiredness. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing problems and shock, with meningitis frequently developing. Inhalation anthrax is often fatal.

**Gastrointestinal anthrax** usually follows the consumption of raw or undercooked contaminated meat and has an incubation period of 1-7 days. Early signs of nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting, and fever are followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea. Intestinal anthrax results in death in 25% to 60% of cases.

### How is anthrax diagnosed?

Anthrax is diagnosed by isolating the bacteria from the blood, skin lesions, or respiratory secretions or by measuring specific antibodies in the blood of persons with suspected cases.

### If a patient is suspected of being exposed to anthrax, should he or she be quarantined or should other family members be tested?

There is no need to quarantine people suspected of being exposed to anthrax or to treat contacts (e.g., household contacts, friends, or coworkers) of people ill with anthrax, unless the contacts were also exposed to the same source of infection.

### What about the vaccinations for anthrax?

Vaccination is not recommended, and the vaccine is not available to health care providers or the general public.

### **Should I take antibiotics to prevent anthrax?**

To prevent anthrax *after exposure*, antibiotics would be given for a specific period of time. We do not recommend that physicians prescribe antibiotics for people *who have not been exposed* to anthrax at this time. The U.S. government currently has enough antibiotics to prevent the disease in 2 million persons exposed to anthrax; therefore we could rapidly get preventive medicine to those who may be affected by this disease.

### **What is ciprofloxacin (Cipro)?**

Ciprofloxacin is an antibiotic used against several bacteria. The use of ciprofloxacin is used *only under the supervision of a physician*. Other antibiotics are available for physicians to prescribe for persons exposed to anthrax.

### **What are the side effects of ciprofloxacin?**

Adverse health effects include vomiting, diarrhea, headaches, dizziness, sun sensitivity, and rash. Side effects may be worse when taking this medicine with caffeine or theophylline-containing medications. This medication can have adverse health reactions in children. Do not give children this medicine unless directed by a physician.

### **Should people ask their physicians to write a prescription for ciprofloxacin, so they have it on hand in case it is needed?**

No. Antibiotics from the nation's stockpile will be made available if they are needed. In the meantime, ciprofloxacin or other antibiotics *should not be prescribed* unless there is a clearly indicated need.

### **Can anthrax spores be killed on letters in the mail by microwave, UV light, or ironing?**

While some of these methods may kill some spores, it is not known what procedures to use (e.g., length of time, temperature, etc.). Furthermore, because of insufficient data on the efficacy of these methods in inactivating anthrax spores, CDC does not recommend these techniques for reliable decontamination.

### **What should people do who get a suspicious letter or package with powder?**

Call 911.