

Kent County Health Department
Anthrax Fact Sheet



What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis*, a type of bacteria that forms spores. Anthrax usually occurs in animals such as cattle, sheep, horses, and goats. It has been rare in humans in the United States. There are three types of anthrax – skin (cutaneous), lung (inhalation), and digestive (gastrointestinal).

How do people get infected with anthrax?

The bacteria that cause anthrax are usually found in soil. They can live as spores for many years, but naturally occurring cases of anthrax are rare.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

The symptoms of anthrax are different depending on the type of infection.

- **Skin (cutaneous):** The first symptom is a raised bump. Within one to two days it develops into a blistered sore, and then a painless ulcer with a characteristic black area in the center. Lymph glands in the area near the wound may swell.
- **Lung (inhalation):** Early symptoms of inhalation anthrax are like cold or flu symptoms (sore throat, cough, mild fever, muscle aches). These symptoms may last two to three days then appear to get better for one to two days. After this time, severe breathing problems and shock can occur.
- **Digestive (gastrointestinal):** Early symptoms include nausea, loss of

appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever, followed by bad stomach pain.

How soon do infected people get sick?

- Symptoms can appear within one week of being exposed for all three types of anthrax.
- It may take up to six weeks for symptoms to appear with inhalation anthrax.

Can anthrax be spread from person to person?

No. Anthrax is not spread from person to person. Contacts of people sick with anthrax do not need to be treated unless they were also exposed to the same source of infection.

Is there anything that can be done to prevent the disease once a person has been exposed to anthrax?

Yes. Early treatment with antibiotics is essential. A number of readily available antibiotics can be used to treat anthrax infection.

How is anthrax treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat all three types of anthrax. Early identification and treatment is critical.

Treatment is different for a person who is exposed to anthrax but is not yet sick when compared to a person who is showing signs of an anthrax infection. Antibiotics are used in combination with the anthrax vaccine to prevent anthrax infection.

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After infection, treatment is usually a 60-day course of antibiotics. Success depends on the type of anthrax infection and how soon treatment begins.

Is there an anthrax vaccine?

Yes. There is a vaccine for anthrax. It's given only to people in the military and other individuals (laboratory workers or veterinarians) who are at high risk for coming into contact with anthrax through their work.

Should I get the anthrax vaccine?

Civilian doctors do not have access to the anthrax vaccine. Since we do not know where or when anthrax might be used by a terrorist, we cannot determine who, if anyone should be vaccinated.

Should I have antibiotics on hand in case of an anthrax attack?

No. Self-administered use of antibiotics by people fearing an anthrax release may cause more harm than good. Using antibiotics when it's unnecessary could be harmful, especially for pregnant women, children and those with specific antibiotic allergies. Overuse of antibiotics can cause their effectiveness to decrease over time.

How dangerous is the anthrax threat?

In 2001, anthrax was deliberately spread through the United States Postal Service by sending letters with powder containing anthrax. Anthrax is classified as a Category A agent by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Category A agents are considered the highest threat to national security due to their ease of transmission and high rate of death or serious illness.