

NEW YORK STATE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

ANTHRAX FACT SHEET

PATIENT SELF-MONITORING INSTRUCTIONS

If you were at a site where suspected material was found and removed by authorities for laboratory testing, please read these instructions.

What is anthrax?

- Anthrax is a rare infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*.
- Anthrax infection can occur in **three** forms: cutaneous (skin), inhalation (lung), and gastrointestinal (stomach and intestines).
- Cutaneous (skin) infection due to anthrax can occur if the spores are in contact with an area of skin that is not intact, such as a cut or sore. Cutaneous (skin) anthrax is marked by a boil-like lesion that eventually forms an ulcer with a black center. The cutaneous form responds well to antibiotics if treatment is started soon after symptoms appear.
- If people have intentionally been exposed, as in a bioterrorist release, breathing the spores is the most likely route of exposure that might lead to a serious lung infection (inhalation anthrax). However, the infection dose for inhalation (lung) anthrax is quite high, and requires exposure to a large number of spores (8,000 – 10,000). Most people who are exposed to anthrax become ill within one week.

Why am I not being transported to a hospital by EMS?

The first step in a suspected case of anthrax exposure is to test the material such as the envelope, contents of mail or other materials thought to be exposed to anthrax. These materials are sent to a special laboratory for a specific test to determine if the unknown substance is positive for anthrax. Until these tests are available there is no need to transport individuals within the site of the suspected materials unless the individual (s) is exhibiting signs of serious illness (which may be unrelated to the suspected exposure to anthrax).

It is important to provide EMS authorities with the requested information so that medical personnel can get back to you if further testing or medical care is needed.

Why am I not being given antibiotics to prevent anthrax infection?

If the laboratory test is positive for anthrax then a decision will be made to follow up on those individuals involved in the situation. Antibiotics are given to people who have skin infections due to anthrax, but are not needed by anyone else in the office.

I'm concerned about getting anthrax. Why shouldn't I be treated?

If you do not need antibiotics you should not take them. Taking antibiotics unnecessarily can be dangerous. The course of antibiotic treatment to prevent anthrax is long (60 days) and many people experience side effects. Although most side effects are mild, severe side effects may occur (such as diarrhea, abdominal symptoms, rash, and allergic reactions) and the use of

antibiotics may dangerously interfere with medications you are currently taking. In addition, the inappropriate use of antibiotics may cause the development of antibiotic-resistant strains of common bacteria.

Is anthrax contagious from person to person?

Inhalation (lung) anthrax is not spread from person to person. Even if someone develops symptoms of inhalation anthrax, they are not contagious. If someone develops cutaneous (skin) anthrax, the drainage from the open sore presents a **low** risk of infection to others. The only way cutaneous (skin) anthrax can be transmitted is by **direct** contact with the drainage from open sore. Anthrax is **not** spread from person to person by casual contact, sharing office space, or coughing or sneezing.

What are the symptoms of anthrax infection?

The symptoms of anthrax depend on where the infection is occurring, but usually develop within 7 days of exposure. Persons should watch for the following symptoms:

- Fever (temperature, greater than 100 degrees F)
- Flu-like symptoms (cough, fatigue, muscle aches), nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- A sore, especially on your face, arms or hands

Anyone developing any of these symptoms should contact their health care provider and the New York State Department of Health immediately.

What should I do now?

- Follow the instructions of the EMS providers, police and any other authority including providing the required information so that the authorities can follow up with you if necessary
- Wash your hands with soap and water
- Look for the symptoms of anthrax infection as specified above

Do I need to disinfect my belongings or myself if I believe I was exposed to anthrax?

Most threats regarding anthrax have proven to be hoaxes. To prevent infection if you have a skin exposure to the powder or other substance, wash your hands vigorously with soap and water, and shower with soap and water if necessary. Similarly, washing possibly contaminated clothes in the regular laundry will safely remove any possible anthrax.

Who can my health care provider call if they have questions or concerns?

Physicians can contact the New York State Department of Health at 1-800-278-2965.

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