



Mayor Thomas M. Menino

Public Health Fact Sheet

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Anthrax

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a disease caused by bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax most commonly occurs in animals, but it can also infect people. Anthrax has the potential to be used as a biological weapon. In late 2001, terrorism related anthrax cases were found in several locations in Connecticut, New York City, New Jersey, Florida and Washington DC.

How is anthrax spread?

Anthrax can be spread by touching it (when there's a cut on the skin), breathing it in, or eating meat contaminated with anthrax. It is not contagious. An infected person cannot give it to others.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

Symptoms of the disease vary depending on how the disease was contracted, and usually occur within 7 days, but can take up to 60 days to appear.

- Cutaneous (skin form): Most anthrax infections occur when bacteria enter through a cut on the skin. The infection begins as a raised itchy bump that resembles an insect bite, but within 1-2 days develops into a blister. The blister ulcerates and forms a black area in the center. With prompt treatment, the vast majority of people recover fully.
- Inhalation: Initial symptoms may resemble the flu with fever, chills, and muscle aches. After several days, the symptoms progress to severe breathing problems and shock. In the past, death occurred 1-2 days after the onset of symptoms. However, during the recent outbreak of anthrax in the United States, with prompt treatment more than half of the people who developed inhalational anthrax survived.
- Intestinal: This form of anthrax occurs from eating contaminated meat. Symptoms include nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting, fever, and are followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.

Can I acquire anthrax from another person?

Person-to-person spread of anthrax is not known to occur. Therefore, only people directly exposed to anthrax spores could develop disease.

Is there an anthrax vaccine?

Yes, there is a limited amount of anthrax vaccine available in the United States. Those in a high risk group include anyone who may be exposed to anthrax, including certain members of the U.S. armed forces, laboratory workers, and workers who may enter or re-enter anthrax contaminated areas. Also, in the event of an attack using anthrax as a weapon, people exposed may be offered the vaccine.

Is there a treatment for anthrax?

Doctors can prescribe effective antibiotics that work against anthrax. To be effective, treatment should be initiated early. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal. With treatment and supportive care, the death rate following the 2001 anthrax bioterrorism outbreak was approximately 50%.

What happens if I have been exposed to anthrax but I am not yet sick?

If it is determined that you have been exposed to anthrax, but you have not yet developed symptoms, you will be given antibiotics (such as ciprofloxacin, doxycycline, or amoxicillin) and possibly the anthrax vaccine to prevent infection with anthrax.

What is being done to prepare for a possible anthrax attack in Boston?

The Boston Public Health Commission has worked with state and federal agencies to better prepare for an anthrax attack. Plans and procedures are in place to respond to an attack and ensure the safety of residents. Hospitals, health care providers, and emergency response personnel have been educated, trained and equipped to better respond to an attack. In Massachusetts, all cases of suspected anthrax are required to be reported immediately to local health departments so appropriate follow-up can be conducted. In Boston, suspect cases should be reported to the Boston Public Health Commission at 617-534-5611.

**For more information, contact
Boston Public Health Commission
Infectious Disease Bureau
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Phone: 617-534-5611 or visit www.bphc.org**