



PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Boston Public Health Commission
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Bioterrorism

What is Bioterrorism?

Bioterrorism is a form of terrorism that involves the intentional release of germs (biological agents such as a bacteria or virus) into the environment. Some examples of biological agents are anthrax and smallpox. In the fall of 2001, an outbreak of anthrax occurred in the United States. To date, no cases of anthrax or other bioterrorism agents have been identified in Massachusetts.

What is Boston Public Health Commission doing to prepare for a possible bioterrorist event?

Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) has been preparing for potential bioterrorism for several years and continues to improve its ability to detect a bioterrorism event. BPHC has been working with health care providers, public safety officials, and others throughout the city to develop an early warning system to detect bioterrorist activity. This system allows time to implement steps to prevent further illness in the event of an actual bioterrorist attack. BPHC also conducts bioterrorism training for the local medical and public health community.

What is BPHC's role in a bioterrorism event in Boston?

BPHC will play a critical role in identifying that a bioterrorism event has occurred. Once a suspect event has occurred, it's Emergency Medical Services will triage cases and transport injured to area hospitals. BPHC will notify appropriate local, state, and federal agencies about the event. Investigation of the event and surveillance for bioterrorism will be directed by BPHC in cooperation with the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The Mayor's office will convene the Boston Emergency Management Agency (BEMA) in order to provide an effective and efficient response to a bioterrorism event.

What do I do if I think I have been exposed to a bioterrorist agent?

If you think you have been exposed to a bioterrorist agent, call 911. Boston Police, Fire, Emergency Medical Services will work together with BPHC to assess the situation. If needed, appropriate samples will be collected for testing and recommendations will be made as to whether you should be seen by a health care provider.

If I actually were exposed to a biological agent, what symptoms should I look for?

Different germs can cause different symptoms. With some agents, symptoms resemble either the flu or food poisoning. People who are exposed to an agent may experience fever, chills, and muscle weakness. Others may experience coughing, diarrhea, abdominal cramping, nausea and vomiting. It is important to remember that these symptoms are common in many illnesses and are not usually the result of bioterrorist events, however, if you are feeling sick, contact your health care provider as soon as possible.

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How long would it take for symptoms to appear?

The length of time it takes for symptoms to appear depends on the type of germ used. Symptoms can appear between several hours to several weeks after exposure.

Is there treatment if I am exposed to a biological agent?

For many biological agents, treatment is available. Different drugs must be used to treat different diseases. Therefore, if you think you may have been exposed to one of these germs, call 911 or your health care provider as soon as possible. Do not attempt to diagnose or medicate yourself.

How can I protect myself against bioterrorism?

There has never been a bioterrorism event documented in Massachusetts. Although chances are extremely small that you will receive a letter containing a bioterrorist agent, when opening mail that is unexpected, look for signs that may be suspicious such as: no return address, misspelled words, more postage than needed, or addressed to a title (such as “president”) rather than to a person. If you receive a letter or package that could be considered suspicious, don't shake or bump it, and do not open, smell, or taste it. If you have touched the item, wash your hands with soap and water and call 911.

Do not stockpile antibiotics or take antibiotics. Antibiotics should only be taken if they have been prescribed to you by a health care provider. Unnecessary use of antibiotics may cause the development of antibiotic resistant strains of bacteria. Antibiotics may also cause problems such as diarrhea, abdominal symptoms, and allergic reactions and create dangerous interactions when used with other medication. A stockpile of medications, including antibiotics that are effective against the most likely bioterrorist agents, have been collected by the federal government and would be rapidly available for distribution in the event of a bioterrorist event.

Do not purchase gas masks for protection against biological agents. Gas masks are intended for short-term use and would only provide protection if worn at the time of a known release. Masks need to be fitted properly to be effective. Improper use of gas masks can cause serious injury or even death by accidental suffocation, especially among persons with underlying heart or lung disease.

**For more information, please contact
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