



# Anthrax Fact Sheet

## **What is anthrax?**

Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by the spore-forming bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. Human infection typically results from contact with infected animals or animal parts, such as bones, hides, and meat. Symptoms and onset of disease vary depending on how the disease was contracted. Symptoms usually occur within seven days of exposure.

## **Where is anthrax usually found?**

Although anthrax can be found anywhere in the world, it is most common in agricultural regions where it occurs in wild and domestic animals, including cattle, sheep, goats, camels, antelopes and other herbivores. Areas of the world currently listed as high risk are South and Central America, Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

## **How is anthrax spread?**

Unlike the cold or flu, anthrax infection is not spread from one person to another. Anthrax infection through cuts and scrapes in the skin is by far the most common form of anthrax. If these scrapes come into contact with contaminated animal parts, such as bones, wool, or hides, anthrax infection may result. Anthrax acquired in this manner is known as cutaneous anthrax. Rarely, anthrax can be acquired through inhalation (breathing), ingestion (eating), or injection of spores. Thoroughly cooking meat can prevent the spread of anthrax through ingestion. Heroin users in Europe were found to have contracted anthrax by using contaminated needles; however, an anthrax case of this kind has never been reported in the United States. While inhalation anthrax is not common, it is the most lethal form of anthrax and has been used in previous bioterrorism plots.

## **Can anthrax be used as a biological weapon?**

In 2001, bioterrorists used the postal system to infect 22 individuals with anthrax, resulting in five deaths. Several nations are believed to be capable of producing and weaponized anthrax. Experts believe that the manufacture of a lethal anthrax aerosol is beyond the capability of individuals or groups without access to advanced biotechnology. In the event of an anthrax attack, press releases, news reports, health department websites, and other methods would be used to communicate who is at risk. Schools, convention centers, and other familiar places would be used to distribute anthrax medication if a large number of people were exposed. To prepare for this and other emergencies, detailed medical histories should be maintained for each member of your household. Allergies, current medical conditions, current medications, and the weight of any children are essential components of a medical history.

*For further information, contact the Oklahoma City-County Health Department  
(405) 425-4437*



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## **Is there a treatment for anthrax?**

Doctors can prescribe effective antibiotics. Early antibiotic use is essential for the treatment of inhalation anthrax because of the rapid course of the disease. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal. If there were an attack using anthrax against the civilian population, timely antibiotic distribution would decrease the number of fatal cases. If enough people were exposed, larger public venues such as schools could be used to distribute medication. There is no need to treat the contacts of a person with anthrax.

## **Is anthrax vaccine available?**

While there is an anthrax vaccine, it is only recommended in very specific populations with a high occupational risk for anthrax exposure. The anthrax vaccine is not recommended for the general public or health care providers currently, though certain emergencies could warrant vaccination.

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