



## Office of Health Emergency Management

### The Facts on ANTHRAX

Because of recent terrorist events, people have expressed concern about the possibility of a terrorist attack involving biological agents such as anthrax, ricin, and smallpox. The Office of Health Emergency Management (OHEM) has prepared several fact sheets to help you understand the different types of biological threats and how they could affect your health.

#### What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis*, a bacterium that forms spores. A bacterium is a very small organism made up of one cell. Many bacteria can cause disease. A spore is a cell that is inactive but may come to life with the right conditions. There are three types of anthrax:

- skin (cutaneous)
- lungs (inhalation)
- digestive

#### How does someone get anthrax?

Anthrax doesn't spread from one person to another, but instead is transmitted by when humans handle products from infected animals or by breathing in anthrax spores from infected animal products, like wool. You could also become infected with gastrointestinal anthrax by eating undercooked meat from infected animals.

#### How dangerous is anthrax?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) classifies agents with recognized bioterrorism potential into three priority areas (A, B and C). Anthrax is classified as a Category A agent. Category A agents are those that:

- pose the greatest possible threat for a bad effect on public health
- may spread across a large area or need public awareness, and
- need a great deal of planning to protect the public's health

In most cases, early treatment with antibiotics can cure cutaneous anthrax. Even if untreated, 80% of people who become infected with cutaneous anthrax do not die. Gastrointestinal anthrax is more serious because between 1/4 and more than half of cases lead to death. Inhalation anthrax is much more severe. In 2001, about half of the cases of inhalation anthrax ended in death.

#### What are the symptoms of anthrax infection?

Anthrax symptoms are different depending on the type of the disease:

- Cutaneous: The first symptom is a small sore that develops into a blister. The blister then develops into a skin ulcer with a black area in the center. The sore, blister and ulcer do not hurt.
- Gastrointestinal: The first symptoms are nausea, loss of appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever, followed by bad stomach pain.

- Inhalation: The first symptoms of inhalation anthrax are like cold or flu symptoms and can include a sore throat, mild fever and muscle aches. Later symptoms include cough, chest discomfort, shortness of breath, tiredness and muscle aches.

(Caution: Do not assume that just because a person has cold or flu symptoms that they have inhalation anthrax.)

### **How soon do infected people get sick?**

Symptoms can appear within 7 days of coming in contact with the bacterium for all three types of anthrax. For inhalation anthrax, symptoms can appear within a week or can take up to 42 days to appear.

### **How is anthrax treated?**

Antibiotics are used to treat all three types of anthrax. Early identification and treatment are important. Treatment is different for a person who is exposed to anthrax, but is not yet sick. Health-care providers will use antibiotics (such as ciprofloxacin, doxycycline, or penicillin) combined with the anthrax vaccine to prevent anthrax infection. Treatment after infection is usually a

60-day course of antibiotics. Success depends on the type of anthrax and how soon treatment begins.

### **Can anthrax be prevented?**

Yes. There is a vaccine to prevent anthrax, but it is not yet available for the general public. 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 contaminated areas, may get the vaccine. Also, in the event of an attack using anthrax as a weapon, people exposed would get the vaccine.

### **What should I do if I think I have anthrax?**

If you are showing symptoms of anthrax infection, call your health-care provider right away.

### **What should I do if I think I've been exposed to anthrax?**

Contact local law enforcement immediately if you think that you may have been exposed to anthrax. This includes being exposed to a suspicious package or envelope that contains powder.

### **What is OHEM doing to prepare for a possible anthrax attack?**

OHEM is working with other state, local, county and federal agencies to prepare for possible bioterrorist attacks. Activities include:

- Developing plans and procedures to respond to an attack using anthrax.
- Working closely with health departments, veterinarians, and laboratories to watch for suspected cases of anthrax. Developing a national electronic database to track potential cases of anthrax.
- Ensuring that there are enough safe laboratories for quickly testing of suspected anthrax cases.
- Working with hospitals, laboratories, emergency response teams, and health-care providers to make sure they have the supplies they need in case of an attack.

**For more information on emergency health preparedness, contact the Office of Health Emergency Management (OHEM) at 505/476-7701 or visit our website at [www.health.state.nm.us/ohem](http://www.health.state.nm.us/ohem)**