Bioterrorism and Anthrax: Facts You Should Know

The release of biological agents is now seen as a possible threat to the United States. Our government is making sure that we are prepared to deal with this threat. Aurora Health Care is working with the state and federal health departments to carry out a detailed plan of action. Here are some facts you should know, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). If you have questions or concerns, be sure to talk with your health care provider. You may also want to ask for printed information about smallpox.

What is anthrax?
Anthrax is a rare disease caused by spore-forming bacteria. Anthrax most often occurs in wild and domestic animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, and camels. But it can also occur in humans, usually when they are exposed to infected animals or their products. The disease can occur in three forms: it can be inhaled through the nose, ingested by eating contaminated food, or absorbed through the skin.

The form of anthrax that might be used in bioterrorist activity results from persons breathing anthrax spores into their lungs or having skin contact with the spores. In persons exposed to anthrax, infection can be prevented with antibiotics (treatment should begin early after exposure).

What are the symptoms of anthrax?
Symptoms vary depending on which form of the disease a person has. The following symptoms will usually occur within seven days of exposure:

- When a person inhales the anthrax spores, the first symptoms may resemble a flu-like illness, with chills and fever. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing problems and shock. Inhalation anthrax is often fatal.
- When a person eats contaminated food, the first symptoms may be nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting, and fever, followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.
- When the bacteria enter the skin, the infection begins as a raised itchy bump that turns into an ulcer with a black base (within a few days). Lymph glands in nearby areas may swell.

Is there a treatment for anthrax?
Antibiotics can be prescribed for anthrax, but early treatment is essential. Delays in treatment lessen the chances of survival.

Can I “catch” anthrax from an infected person?
Direct person-to-person spread of anthrax is highly unlikely. This is not a contagious disease.

Should I be vaccinated against anthrax?
No. The vaccine is not recommended for the general public at this time. It is available to military personnel and others at high risk for exposure to anthrax. Vaccination requires six shots over an 18-month period, followed by booster shots. If outbreaks of the disease occur, our nation’s strategy will be to vaccinate people as needed.

Should I be tested for anthrax?
Testing should occur only if there is high likelihood of exposure. Your health care provider can refer you for testing if you have been exposed to anthrax or have symptoms.

Should I be taking antibiotics to prevent anthrax or other diseases?
No, this is not a good idea for several reasons:

Continued
• When people take antibiotics and are not sick, the bacteria develop resistance to the drugs. As a result, the drugs may not work well when they’re really needed.

• The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have built a large national stockpile of drugs that may be needed for disease outbreaks. These drugs can be quickly delivered to areas that need them.

• Like other drugs, antibiotics have side effects.

• Personal stockpiling is not necessary. Most drugs lose their effectiveness over a period of time. In some cases, taking old drugs can be dangerous to your health.

**Should I get a gas mask?**
No. A gas mask would protect you against a biological agent only if you were wearing it at the time the agent was released into the air. In other words, you would have to wear an airtight mask 24 hours a day to guarantee complete protection. Also, gas masks can be harmful if not fitted properly, especially to people with heart or lung diseases.

**What can I do right now?**
• Ask for help if you need it. If you are concerned about physical symptoms or possible exposure to anthrax, call your health care provider. If you feel the need to talk with a professional about concerns or fears that are interfering with your work, sleep, or daily routine, call Aurora Behavioral Health Services toll-free at 1-877-666-7223.

• Take care of yourself. Keep yourself healthy so you can better deal with the stress this situation brings to many. Eat a balanced diet, get plenty of rest, and be sure to take time out for things you enjoy.

• Get your annual flu shot. The first symptoms of anthrax can be similar to those of influenza (flu). A flu shot will not prevent anthrax, but it will help prevent influenza and its symptoms.

**Where can I get more information?**
• Ask your health care provider
• Call your local or state health department
• Visit the CDC’s website at [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)