Bioterrorism and Smallpox: Facts You Should Know

The release of smallpox 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.

What is smallpox?
Smallpox is an infection caused by a virus called variola. It can be spread from person to person through close contact. Most people survive smallpox, but it can cause serious complications or death.

Why isn’t everyone given the smallpox vaccine?
There have been no known cases of smallpox since 1978. In the United States, routine vaccination against smallpox ended in 1972. About half of the people in the U.S. have never been vaccinated against smallpox. If you were vaccinated before 1972, it is unlikely that the vaccine would give you adequate protection now.

Is the smallpox vaccine available now?
After the events of September and October, 2001, our government took action to prepare against further terrorist attacks. This included ordering enough smallpox vaccine to protect the American people in the event of a smallpox outbreak.

The vaccine is not available to the public at this time. But there is enough vaccine to protect everyone in the U.S. if needed.

Is the vaccine safe?
Most people have normal, mild effects from the vaccine, such as a sore arm, mild rash, fever, and body aches. Some people have more severe side effects. About one-third of people may feel bad enough to miss work or school, or have trouble sleeping after getting the vaccine.

There are risks with the vaccine. For every million people vaccinated, between 14 and 52 could have a life-threatening reaction. About 1 or 2 people per million could die from the vaccine (people who have died are usually those with weak immune systems).

Who should NOT get the vaccine?
Those who should not receive the smallpox vaccine (unless they are exposed to smallpox) include:
- People who are allergic to the vaccine or any of its components
- People who have, or have had, skin conditions such as eczema, atopic dermatitis, or acne
- People with a weakened immune system, such as those who have received a transplant, are HIV positive, are being treated for cancer, or are taking medications that suppress the immune system (such as steroids)
- Pregnant women
- Anyone who has close personal contact with a person in any of the above categories

The following persons also should NOT receive the vaccine unless exposed to smallpox:
- Breastfeeding mothers
- Infants under 12 months of age
- Children and teens under 18 years of age

Does the vaccine work if given after someone is exposed to smallpox?
Vaccination within 3 days of exposure will prevent or greatly reduce smallpox symptoms in most people. Vaccination within 4 to 7 days will offer some protection from the disease or may reduce symptoms.
What are the symptoms of smallpox?
The first symptoms usually appear within 12 to 14 days after the virus enters the body. These include high fever, fatigue, headache, and backache. Within the next few days a rash appears, mostly on the face, arms, and legs. The rash starts with flat red spots that become pus-filled after a few days and then begin to crust early in the second week. Scabs appear and then begin to fall off in about three to four weeks. The scabs can leave scars when healed.

How is smallpox spread?
The virus can spread through droplets discharged from the mouth and nose of an infected person. Anyone having face-to-face contact within 6 to 7 feet of an infected person will be exposed to the virus. The highest risk is during the first week of illness when the largest amount of virus is present in the person’s saliva. The virus can also be spread through contaminated clothing or bed linen.

Can smallpox be treated?
There is no proven treatment, but new antiviral drugs are being studied. Patients with smallpox can be given support measures such as intravenous fluids and medicines to control fever and relieve pain.

What can you do right now?
• Ask for help if you need it. If you have questions or concerns, talk with your health care provider. If you feel the need to talk with a professional about concerns or fears that interfere 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 the things you enjoy.

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

Where can you get more information?
• Ask your health care provider
• Call your local or state health department
• Visit the CDC’s smallpox website at http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/smallpox
• Visit the government’s new smallpox website at http://www.smallpox.gov