

West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources

Information for the Public Regarding Anthrax

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a rare infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. It can occur in wild and domestic hoofed animals, such as cattle, sheep, goats, etc. It can also occur in humans when they are exposed to the bacterium. There are 3 forms: cutaneous (skin), inhalation (lungs), and gastrointestinal (stomach and intestines). With intentional exposure, as in a bioterrorist release, breathing in the spores or contact with openings in the skin (cuts, scratches, abrasions, etc.) are the most likely routes of entry into the body. Gastrointestinal anthrax occurs when people eat meat from anthrax-infected animals.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

- Cutaneous (skin): exposed skin itches; large boil-like sore appears; sore becomes a black scab. If not treated, the infection can spread to the lymph nodes and bloodstream.
- Inhalation (lungs): cold or flu-like symptoms; symptoms become severe with serious breathing problems.
- Gastrointestinal (stomach and intestines): fever; abdominal pain; loose, watery bowel movements; vomiting with blood in vomitus.

How soon after exposure would symptoms begin?

Symptoms generally develop between 1 and 7 days after exposure, but prolonged periods up to 60 days after exposure are possible.

Can anthrax be spread person to person?

- Inhalation (lung) anthrax: **not** spread from person to person.
- Cutaneous (skin) anthrax: drainage from an open sore presents a **low risk** of infection to others, and this must be **direct** contact.
- Gastrointestinal (stomach and intestine) anthrax: **not** spread person to person.

Can anthrax be treated?

If given early in the illness, certain antibiotics are effective against anthrax.

How likely is it that I will be exposed to anthrax, other biological agents?

In West Virginia, the last reported case of human anthrax occurred in 1947. Historically, in the United States, the individual risk of disease from bioterrorism has been very, very small.

What will be done to evaluate an incident?

State and local public health, emergency, and law enforcement agencies will work together to evaluate all incidents. Examining the circumstances of the incident, the suspect material, and the type of exposure is required to determine if the incident represents a public health risk.