

FACT SHEET: ANTHRAX

Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by the spore-forming bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*.

Occurrence:

The bacteria spores can live in the soil for many years and usually infect farm animals such as cows and sheep. It is uncommon in humans.

Transmission:

Anthrax cannot be transmitted person to person. There is no need to immunize or treat contacts of persons ill with anthrax. There are three ways of contracting anthrax:

Inhalation: anthrax spores are breathed in through the nose or mouth.

Cutaneous: the spores enter the body through an open wound on the skin, such as a cut or abrasion when handling contaminated products or infected animals.

Intestinal: the disease may occur after eating contaminated meat.

Symptoms:

Symptoms vary depending on how the disease is contracted.

Inhalation anthrax begins with flu-like symptoms such as fatigue, fever, cough and mild chest discomfort, followed rapidly by severe respiratory distress and shock. It is often fatal if not treated in time.

Cutaneous anthrax produces small painless bumps on the skin which become blisters and then ulcers with a black center.

Intestinal anthrax causes nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting and fever, followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood and severe diarrhea.

Incubation Period:

The incubation period for inhalation anthrax is between 1 and 6 days, but may be longer.

Management:

In persons exposed to anthrax, infection can be prevented with antibiotic treatment. Anthrax is usually susceptible to penicillin, doxycycline, and fluoroquinolones, such as ciprofloxacin. Anthrax disease can be controlled if antibiotics are taken early after exposure.

An anthrax vaccine has been used for people with a high likelihood of occupational exposure to anthrax, e.g. veterinarians. The vaccine is not available to the public, is not 100% effective and is associated with many side effects.

Any suspected exposure to anthrax should be immediately reported to the local public health officer and treatment sought at the local emergency department.

Preventative measures:

Anthrax can be prevented by avoiding eating contaminated meat that has not been properly slaughtered and cooked or by avoiding contact with contaminated animal products or packages of concern.