

Facts:

from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment



Skin Anthrax: Questions and Answers

What is anthrax?

- Anthrax is a disease caused by bacteria that form spores, a stage of the bacteria that is highly strong and can last for years.
- The spores may occur naturally in soil, and the disease is found occasionally in animals in Colorado and the United States.

How do people get anthrax?

In people, anthrax can cause disease in three different forms:

- Inhalation – caused when the spores are inhaled into the lungs.
- Intestinal – caused when undercooked meat from an infected animal is eaten.
- Cutaneous – caused when broken skin comes into contact with infected animals, wool, hides, or items contaminated with the anthrax spores.

What is skin anthrax?

Skin anthrax, or cutaneous anthrax, is the most common and least severe form of anthrax infection.

- The most common sites of skin anthrax are exposed areas such as the arms, hands, face, and neck.
- The first sign of infection usually is an itchy, red sore, similar to an insect bite, at the location where the bacteria entered the skin.
- The red, round sore forms a blister, which may break.
- After two to six days, a painless,

black scab may form.

- There may be swelling, redness around the sore; fever, and/or painful lymph glands.

How is skin anthrax treated?

- If skin anthrax is possible, a doctor may order antibiotics while waiting for confirming test results. The medicine usually is taken as a pill for a week to 10 days.
- For the first 24 hours of antibiotic treatment, a doctor will advise “contact precautions.” There is a very low risk of spreading the disease if there is direct contact with an open sore. It is best to keep used clothing, bandages, and towels from contact with other people.
- With treatment, people with skin anthrax completely recover.

How do animals get anthrax?

- When exposed to air, the bacteria form a protective, hardy spore to survive.
- The spores can remain dormant, or inactive, in the soil and grass for many years. Certain weather conditions can re-activate the spores.
- When grazing animals swallow or breathe in anthrax spores, the bacteria begin to grow again and can cause disease.
- Ranchers, veterinarians, sheep-shearers, taxidermists, and persons in other animal-related occupations can get skin anthrax from handling infected animals, hides, or meat. A

vaccine is available for livestock and horses, but it must be used before the animals are infected.

- Hunters should harvest only healthy animals, wear latex gloves when field dressing them, and thoroughly cook the meat before eating it.
- Direct person-to-person spread of anthrax is unlikely.

Can my pets catch skin anthrax?

- Dogs, cats, and other carnivores (meat-eating animals) are rarely infected with anthrax.
- Amphibians, reptiles, fish, and most birds do not get anthrax.

continued on back



Skin, or cutaneous, anthrax is treated with antibiotics.

continued from front

Is there an anthrax vaccine for people?

- There is a human vaccination for anthrax that is given in a series of six doses.
- The vaccine is required for U.S. military personnel. It is not available, or recommended, for use in the general public.
- It is not necessary to immunize or treat contacts of someone with anthrax, unless they also were exposed to the bacteria.

Can anthrax be used as a weapon?

- Anthrax is not an effective weapon of mass destruction, but it could be used as a weapon to harm a smaller number of people.
- If there is a terrorist attack using anthrax, U.S. health officials have access to antibiotic medicines from stockpiles all over the country.
- Antibiotics can be used to prevent symptoms if people have been exposed to anthrax.

Reliable sources of information

Colorado HELP hotline

877-462-2911 (toll-free)
M-F 7 a.m. – 11 p.m.; S-S 9:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment

www.cdphe.state.co.us
303-692-2700

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.bt.cdc.gov
800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636) (toll-free)
888-232-6348 (TTY)

Ready Colorado

800-639-READY (7323) (toll-free)
www.readycolorado.com



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