

ANTHRAX

Polk County Preparations

Because of ongoing concerns about potential terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is working to improve overall preparation against terrorism. One aspect of this preparation is to learn more about protecting ourselves against possible attacks with biological agents.

If a public health emergency happens in our community, the Polk County Public Health Department will be the local agency responsible for preparing and guiding medical response and public information efforts. During such an emergency, a critical role of the Public Health Department will be to work with other local first responders, such as fire and police. The Public Health Department will also coordinate response activities with state and federal agencies.

The Polk County Public Health Department is providing information to help you understand what anthrax is and what kind of response you should take in the unlikely event that you would be exposed to the agent that causes anthrax.

What is Anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious disease that usually occurs in domestic farm animals like cattle, sheep and goats. The disease can be transmitted to humans under certain conditions, but is rare in the United States.

Anthrax cannot be passed from person to person. But it is possible for people to be exposed to anthrax in three different ways:

- Eating undercooked meat from an anthrax-infected animal.
- Handling products from diseased animals (like wool from infected sheep) whereby anthrax can enter the body through a cut in the skin.
- Inhaling or breathing anthrax spores.

Anthrax and Bioterrorism

Although terrorists can use many methods to spread anthrax, a likely method is spreading it through the mail. In 2001, anthrax powder was deliberately put into letters and packages that were sent through the U.S. Postal Service. This powder exposed anyone who handled or opened that mail. Approximately half of these cases of inhalation anthrax (from opening mail with the anthrax powder) were fatal.

In the event of a bioterrorist attack with anthrax, the Public Health Department and emergency officials will provide emergency information and instructions on how to protect yourself and your family, including the safe handling of suspicious mail. You may be asked to evacuate (leave the area) or shelter-in-place (remain inside a building). In either case, it is important that you and your family have an Emergency Preparation Plan.

Symptoms of Anthrax

The symptoms of anthrax vary depending on how it enters the body.

If you were exposed to anthrax by eating undercooked meat from an animal with anthrax, symptoms could include nausea, loss of appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever, followed by bad stomach pain.

If you were exposed to anthrax through a cut in the skin, the first symptoms are usually a small sore that develops into a blister, and then into a blackened skin ulcer. These symptoms do not generally cause any pain.

If you were exposed to anthrax through inhalation, symptoms usually resemble a cold. In the days following exposure, the symptoms get worse and include severe breathing problems and shock.

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Inhalation anthrax is the most serious and can lead to the highest percentage of fatalities. Most symptoms appear within 7 days or, in the case of inhalation anthrax, can take up to 40 days to appear after exposure.

Treatment for Anthrax

There is a vaccine against anthrax. Currently, the vaccine is only for people at high risk for exposure, including laboratory workers, people who handle imported animal products and certain military personnel.

If you were exposed to anthrax, antibiotics would be given for up to 60 days to prevent the disease. Treatment would also include supportive medical care to relieve symptoms. Successful treatment depends on the type of anthrax you were exposed to and how quickly treatment is begun.

If you have any questions about anthrax, please contact the **Polk County Health Department at 515-286-3798**. Public Health Department staff members are available to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information about putting together an Emergency Preparation Plan, visit the Department of Homeland Security site at www.ready.gov. Also, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at www.bt.cdc.gov for additional information.

