

Anthrax General Information

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is an infection caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. The bacteria form spores that live in the soil for many years. The spores are extremely tiny and are invisible to the naked eye. In large quantities, the spores are usually brown and powdery and may look like cinnamon or cocoa. However, the colour may be different if the spores are mixed with another substance. They do not have an odour and you cannot smell them. The infection is spread by the spores.

Anthrax usually occurs in farm animals such as cows and sheep. It is uncommon in humans.

Can anthrax spread from person to person?

No, anthrax cannot spread from one person to another.

What are the signs of anthrax?

Anthrax spores can affect the skin [cutaneous infection], the stomach [gastrointestinal infection] or the lungs [inhalation] infection.

- In a skin infection, a small painless bump appears on the skin. This bump then becomes a blister and then an ulcer with a black centre. This is the most common type of infection.
- In a stomach infection, the signs are fever, loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhea.
- In a lung infection, the first signs resemble the flu. Symptoms may include fever, sore throat and feeling unwell. After several days, this is followed by having trouble breathing. This is the most serious type of infection.

Can anthrax be treated?

Anthrax can be treated with several common antibiotics. It is important that antibiotics be started right away. Only those recommended to receive antibiotics should take them. Antibiotics should not be taken “just in case.”

How do I get anthrax?

Usually, the people who get anthrax are those who work with infected animals. Spores from infected animal hides may get into broken skin and cause skin infections. Eating meat contaminated with spores can cause stomach infections. Breathing in a large quantity of spores can cause a lung infection.

Signs of illness usually do not appear until 1 to 7 days after exposure to the anthrax spores. It can take as long as 60 days for a lung [inhalation] infection.