

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by a spore-forming bacterium that can infect all warm-blooded animals including man.

Who gets anthrax?

Anthrax most commonly occurs in warm-blooded animals, but can also infect humans. When anthrax affects humans, it is usually due to an occupational exposure to infected animals or animal products such as wool or hair from diseased animals. Anthrax in wild livestock has occurred in the United States.

How is anthrax spread?

The anthrax bacteria can live in soil for many years. Most (95%) cases of anthrax infection in humans occur when the bacterium enters a cut or abrasion on the skin or by inhaling anthrax spores that have been aerosolized. Infection of the intestinal tract can occur by eating undercooked meat from diseased animals.

What are the symptoms of anthrax?

The symptoms vary depending upon the type of exposure. With skin exposure, a painless, boil-like lesion appears which eventually forms a black center. A swelling of the lymph glands close to the lesion may occur. With respiratory exposure, symptoms may resemble the common cold and may progress to severe breathing problems and even death. Initial symptoms of intestinal tract infection are nausea, loss of appetite and vomiting, followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within 1-7 days.

Does past infection with anthrax make a person immune?

A second attack with this disease can occur but is unlikely.

What is the treatment for anthrax?

Specific antibiotics can be prescribed by a doctor to treat anthrax. To be effective, treatment should be initiated immediately. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal.

Can anthrax be spread from person-to-person?

Anthrax is not transmitted from person-to-person.

What can be done to prevent the spread of anthrax?

People in high-risk occupations can be vaccinated against anthrax. Careful handling of dead animals suspected of having anthrax; providing good ventilation when processing hides, fur, hair or wool; and vaccinating animals can help prevent anthrax. In addition, in the rare occasions where persons are known to be exposed to anthrax, appropriate antibiotics and vaccination can be started to prevent development of disease.

Is there a vaccine available to prevent anthrax?

Currently, anthrax vaccine is recommended only for military personnel deployed to high-risk areas, people

who work with the organism in a laboratory, people who work with imported hide or furs in high-risk areas and people who handle potentially infected animal products. Anthrax vaccine is in limited supply at this time and is not recommended for children under 18 years of age.

New River Health District, September 2001