

## Anthrax: What Everyone Should Know Ⓢ

(NAPSA)—Moon suits. Protective masks. Powdery substances. Lately, when it comes to news, it seems it's all about anthrax and, without the facts, it can sound frightening.

Anthrax is not a new disease. It is an infection caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. It occurs in domesticated and wild animals, such as goats, sheep, cattle, horses and deer. Although rare in the United States, it is a common problem in developing countries or countries without veterinary public health programs, such as in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. People working with infected livestock or contaminated animal products are typically most at risk for contracting anthrax.

Anthrax is not contagious. Unlike contagious illnesses like the flu, which are transmitted from person to person, one can only become infected with anthrax by coming into direct contact with the spores. This happens when spores enter a person's body through a cut or break in the skin (cutaneous), by breathing in the spores (inhalational) or by eating foods contaminated with the spores (gastrointestinal). Of the anthrax cases reported in the U.S. over the past 50 years, most have been cutaneous, which is the most treatable form of the disease.

### Know the symptoms

One way to help protect yourself is to know the symptoms of anthrax infection. Although varying with the type of exposure, they usually occur within seven days, but can take as long as 60 days to develop. Symptoms of inhalational anthrax include fever, muscle aches and fatigue, and, unlike the flu, rapidly progress to severe breathing problems.

Skin infections begin as an itchy, raised bump that progresses to a fluid-filled blister which finally turns into a black lesion. Initial symptoms of intestinal anthrax are nausea, vomiting, fever, abdominal pain and severe diarrhea.

### Antibiotics: the pros and cons

The good news is that anthrax infection can be prevented among people exposed to anthrax spores. Antibiotics like ciprofloxacin, doxycycline or penicillin are effective, depending on the type of anthrax and the patient's medical history. However, storing these drugs in your home or taking them "in case" you might be exposed is not advised. Taking them unnecessarily can make these germs resistant to antibiotics. We must conserve this very valuable medication for when it is really needed. Also, it's important to keep in mind that, like all drugs, antibiotics can have side effects.

### Treatment when and where you need it

In times of crisis, the Department of Health and Human Services, through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has established a large-scale cache of medical supplies, including infection-fighting antibiotics that can be delivered to an affected area in less than 12 hours. Known as the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile, these life-saving drugs are warehoused in secured locations around the country. In addition, a network of laboratories throughout the nation, the Laboratory Response Network, is also available to process specimens for timely and accurate diagnoses of suspected biological agents.

To learn more about anthrax, as well as CDC's Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response, visit the Web site at [www.bt.cdc.gov](http://www.bt.cdc.gov).