

ADVICE ON THE THREAT OF ANTHRAX IN VICTORIA

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Following recent reports of anthrax cases in the United States linked to terrorism, there been concerns about similar incidents in Australia. It is important to remember that there have been no human cases of anthrax in Australia since 1998, and there is no reason to believe that anthrax spores are being spread through the Australian postal system.

What to do about suspicious letters and packages

If you are concerned about a suspicious package or letter you should call the police on 000. Advice on handling of suspicious packages and what to do if you have opened them can be found at <http://www.ag.gov.au/aghome/agnews/2001newsag/mailfactsheet.htm>

Management of persons in contact with suspicious packages

If the package has NOT been opened you do not need to take any action other than report the incident to the Police on 000.

If you have been in contact with the contents of suspicious package you should:

1. Contact the Police on 000. The contents of suspicious packages that have been opened will be taken for testing.
2. Wash your hands with soap and water.
3. You do not need to commence antibiotic treatment. It is best to wait for the laboratory test results (which take up to 48 hours) rather than inappropriately commence treatment.
4. If any suspicious material (such as a powder) has got on your clothes or body you will be provided with more specific advice on precautions.
5. If the laboratory results confirm the existence of anthrax, you will be contacted and offered appropriate antibiotic treatment.
6. If you develop any of the symptoms listed below, see your doctor. For further advice, contact the Department of Human Services on 1300 365 677.

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a rare and potentially fatal bacterial disease. The infectious agent is *Bacillus anthracis*, a hardy bacterium that tends to target animals such as deer, cattle, sheep, goats and horses through contaminated soil. *Bacillus anthracis* bacteria form spores, which are tough shells that help the microbes survive unsuitable conditions and enables the bacteria to remain viable in the soil for many years.

Anthrax infection is rare in animals and very rare in humans. Illness usually develops within two to seven days of exposure. Anthrax is a rare occupational hazard for anyone who works with livestock or their by-products, such as abattoir workers, tanners, veterinarians and farmers.

Anthrax infection occurs all around the world but tends to be more common in certain places, including some parts of Africa, Asia, South America and the Middle East

Symptoms

Symptoms of anthrax depend on which body part is affected, but may include:

- Skin sores
- Fever, cough and flu-like symptoms
- General malaise, headache and gastrointestinal upsets
- Chest pain and joint pains

Different types of anthrax infection

Anthrax can target various body parts, including:

Cutaneous anthrax (rare)

Skin is the most commonly affected body part. The bacteria get into the body via a cut or graze. The skin becomes itchy, then develops a sore that turns into a blister. The blister (vesicle) may break and bleed. Within two to seven days, the broken blister becomes a sunken, dark-coloured or black scab. The sores are usually painless. Without antibiotic treatment, the infection can spread and become life-threatening.

Pulmonary anthrax (very rare)

Anthrax infection involving the lungs may occur when the bacteria spores are inhaled. Initially, the infection may seem like a mild upper respiratory tract infection. Without appropriate antibiotic treatment at this stage, the person's health may rapidly deteriorate over the next few days, with a high risk of death.

Intestinal anthrax (very rare)

This is a very rare type of infection in developed countries. The bacteria spores access the body when the person eats the undercooked meat of an infected animal, usually one that has died in the field. Symptoms first include nausea, vomiting, vomiting blood, diarrhoea and high temperature. If the infection spreads to the blood (septicaemia), there is a high risk of death.

Is someone infected with anthrax or exposed to anthrax a risk to others?

No. Anthrax is not spread from person-to-person.

Diagnosis methods

Anthrax is diagnosed using a number of tests, including skin and blood tests, chest x-rays and throat swabs.

Vaccination

There is no place for routine vaccination in the prevention of anthrax in Australia.

Where to get help

Victorian Department of Human Services 1300 365 677

Further information

Links to other sites which contain information related to bioterrorism can be found at the Department of Human Services website: <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/phd/index.htm>

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