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## FACT SHEET

### What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a serious disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis*, a bacterium that forms spores. A bacterium is a very small organism made up of one cell. Many bacteria can cause disease. A spore is a cell that is dormant (asleep) but may come to life with the right conditions.

There are three types of anthrax:

- **Skin (cutaneous)**
- **Lungs (inhalation)**
- **Digestive (gastrointestinal)**

### How do you get it?

- Anthrax is not known to spread from one person to another.
- **Anthrax from animals:** Humans can become infected with anthrax by handling products from infected animals or by breathing in anthrax spores from infected animal products (like wool, for example). People also can become infected with gastrointestinal anthrax by eating undercooked meat from infected animals.
- **Anthrax as a weapon:** Anthrax also can be used as a weapon. This happened in the United States in 2001. Anthrax was deliberately spread through the postal system by sending letters with powder containing anthrax. This caused 22 cases of anthrax infection.

### How dangerous is anthrax?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention classifies agents with recognized bioterrorism potential into three priority areas (A, B and C). For more information on these categories, visit [www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/agentlist-category.asp](http://www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/agentlist-category.asp)

Anthrax is classified as a Category A agent. Category A agents are those that:

- pose the greatest possible threat for a bad effect on public health;
- may spread across a large area or need public awareness;
- need a great deal of planning to protect the public's health.

In most cases, early treatment with antibiotics can cure cutaneous anthrax. Even if untreated, 80% of people who become infected with cutaneous anthrax do not die. Gastrointestinal anthrax is more serious because between 25% and more than 50% of cases lead to death. Inhalation anthrax is much more severe. In 2001, about half of the cases of inhalation anthrax ended in death.



**What should I do if I think I have anthrax?**

If you are showing symptoms of anthrax infection, call your health-care provider right away.

**What should I do if I think I have been exposed to anthrax?**

Contact local law enforcement immediately if you think that you may have been exposed to anthrax. This includes being exposed to a suspicious package or envelope that contains powder.