

PITTSBURGH MERCY HEALTH SYSTEM  
FACTS ABOUT ANTHRAX  
*Patient Education*

For centuries, anthrax has caused disease in animals and uncommonly, serious illness in humans throughout the world. Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by spores that germinate into bacteria and multiply in the body. The bacteria is called *Bacillus anthracis*. It is usually associated with livestock such as cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats and can also infect humans.

**How do you get it?** You can get anthrax by handling infected animals, eating infected meat, or breathing in the bacteria. In humans, three types of anthrax infection occur: cutaneous, gastrointestinal, and inhalation.

**What are the symptoms?** Symptoms of anthrax vary depending upon how the disease was contracted, but usually occur within 7 days after exposure.

- Cutaneous anthrax is most common and typically follows exposure to anthrax-b
- Binfected animals. Infection occurs when the anthrax bacteria enters through a break in the skin i.e. cut or abrasion. Characteristic of cutaneous anthrax is a painless ulcer or lesion with a black center.
- Gastrointestinal (GI) anthrax is less common and follows consumption of contaminated meat. The GI tract becomes inflamed causing nausea, abdominal pain, followed by vomiting of blood and severe diarrhea.
- Inhalation anthrax initial symptoms may resemble a common cold. After several days, the symptoms progress to severe breathing problems and shock. Inhalation anthrax is usually fatal.

**Can I catch anthrax from another person who is infected?** No, anthrax is not transmitted from one person to another. Standard precautions will be used by health care workers in the care of patients infected with anthrax. Special isolation precautions are not required.

**Is there treatment for anthrax?** Penicillin, ciprofloxacin, or doxycycline are antibiotics of choice for treatment. All forms of the disease must be treated promptly. If untreated, it can be fatal. Antibiotics should not be prescribed unless there is evidence of infection or significant exposure. Indiscriminate use of antibiotics can lead to the development of bacterial resistance.

**What do I do if I think I have been exposed?** Wash area with soap and water. Call 911 or local authorities. The Centers for Disease Prevention and Control and the Pennsylvania Department of Health does not recommend human testing (cultures) for exposure and antibiotic treatment unless signs and symptoms of illness or there is a positive sample from the environment.

**Is there a vaccine?** Yes, anthrax vaccine can prevent infection. However, vaccination is not recommended for the general public to prevent disease and is not available.

