

Understanding ANTHRAX

SEPARATING FACT FROM FEAR

By MELISSA BRADDOCK
THE BATTALION

As of Tuesday, there have been ten confirmed cases of anthrax. All were initiated by anthrax spores contained in mailed envelopes.

Lawhorn said that a more widespread distribution, such as crop-dusting, would be much more difficult and is unlikely.

"It's easy to infect a few people," he said "but with a larger distribution the dilution effects and weather effects keep the material from being sufficiently concentrated."

The risk of the average person contracting anthrax is incredibly low, according to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

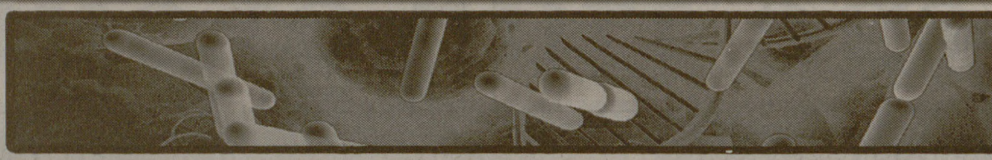
For those who are really concerned, Lawhorn suggests using gloves to open mail and to open it with a knife over a piece of black paper. This allows easy observation

of any powders from the envelope.

"If you see a suspicious package or find powder in an envelope, leave it right there, call 911, and wash your hands and face," Lawhorn urged.

"We've all learned a lot in the last few days about having an increased state of vigilance around life in general, and mail in particular," said Dr. Jeffrey P. Koplan, Director of the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention.

"The best approach to take in dealing with anthrax, is to know a little bit more about it," Koplan said. "For one, it's not contagious, it doesn't spread from person-to-person. Two, it's a disease that once exposed to is treatable and we have a number of different antibiotics that can be used to treat it."



3 TYPES OF ANTHRAX

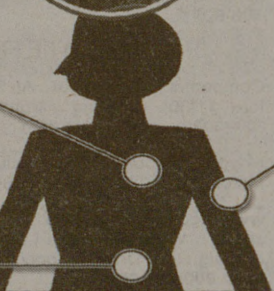
Inhalation: The biggest threat. Small spores can penetrate into the tiny air sacs in the lung. Initial symptoms resemble a common cold, progressing to severe breathing problems and shock. Fatal in 98% of untreated cases and 80% of treated cases. 5 cases reported



Cutaneous: Most anthrax infections occur via a cut on the skin. Symptoms begin as a raised itchy bump that develops into a swollen, painless black sore. Deaths are rare with rapid antibiotic treatment; without treatment up to 20% of cases are lethal. 5 cases reported



Intestinal: A very rare form acquired by eating infected meat. Symptoms include vomiting, severe diarrhea, and fever. Lethal in 25% to 60% of cases. No cases reported



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Q&A: Anthrax

Q: What is anthrax?

A: An infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*, most cases are cutaneous, or skin, infections. If bacterial spores get into the lungs, they can cause a much more deadly infection.

Q: What are anthrax "spores"?

A: When exposed to air, the anthrax bacterium becomes dormant and forms a spore resembling a seed. The spore is extremely durable and can survive in soil for decades. In an animal or human host, they quickly shed this shell and become active.

Q: What does anthrax look like?

A: Spores are invisible to the naked eye. A toxic dose of many thousand particles is still smaller than a speck of dust. Under a microscope, it looks like a collection of connected cylinders.

A powder is used as a carrier to keep spores from sticking together and to bring them into the lungs. These powders might be brownish and grainy or fine and white.

Q: Where does anthrax come from?

A: It is mainly a disease of grazing animals in Asia, Africa and parts of the U.S., including Texas. The spores survive in the soil until an animal eats or inhales them. Anthrax was developed as part of a larger biological weapons program by several

countries, including the former Soviet Union and the United States.

Q: Why develop it into a weapon?

A: Anthrax is almost always deadly if not treated early, and there is no immediate indication of exposure. It is one of the easiest biological agents to manufacture, and spores can be stored for decades without losing potency. Spores can be spread in the air.

Q: How can people be infected?

A: Anthrax has to be inhaled in the lungs, eaten, or pass through a cut in the skin to cause disease. Between 8,000 and 10,000 spores are needed to cause infection. It is not considered a contagious dis-

ease and cannot be passed through the air from person to person.

Q: How can it be treated?

A: Many common antibiotics including penicillin and tetracycline are effective against natural anthrax. Cipro was a first choice because of concern about the potential use of strains of anthrax that have been genetically modified to resist other antibiotics.

Q: How effective is treatment?

A: If treated in the first few days, it is almost always curable.

Q: Will microwaving or ironing mail kill anthrax spores?

A: No. According to A&M scientists, microwaving is not effective. Steam iron-

ing might be effective, but it would take 5-10 minutes of steam to kill spores. Additionally, the steam could then have active anthrax spores in it.

Q: What is the average risk of contracting anthrax?

A: The risk of any individual contracting anthrax is infinitesimal.

Q: Should I take/store antibiotics "just in case"?

A: No. There's no need to buy or store antibiotics. Unnecessary antibiotic use could cause side effects, prevent proper medicine distribution, and even lead to more resistant forms of bacteria.

SOURCES: Centers for Disease Control; Dept. of Defense; AP; Dr. Bruce Lawhorn, Texas A&M

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