

Bioterrorism- Frequently Asked Questions

What is bioterrorism?

Bioterrorism is the use or threatened use of bacteria, viruses, or toxins as weapons.



How likely is a bioterrorism attack?

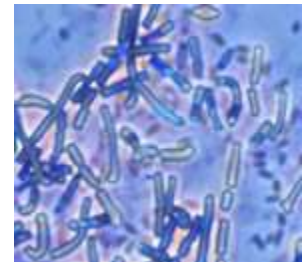
In the last 20 years, several small successful and unsuccessful attacks have occurred in the U.S. and elsewhere. Although hard to predict, many experts have called bioterrorism a low probability, high consequence risk. However likely bioterrorism is or isn't, the consequences of such an attack could be devastating, and thus, there is a need for preparedness.

What diseases can be used as biological weapons?

Although there are a number of diseases that could be used as weapons, those of most concern include anthrax, smallpox, botulism, and plague.

Can I get immunized against anthrax?

There is a vaccine for anthrax, but availability is limited to the military and those who might come in contact with natural anthrax in their work. It's not one shot but a series of six shots over 18 months with yearly boosters. Some people, concerned about the threat of an anthrax attack, have asked their physicians for anthrax vaccine. Although this is understandable, physicians do not have this vaccine and cannot obtain it. Given the unknown specific threat to the general population, we are not recommending any specific vaccinations for bioterrorism including anthrax. Vaccine might be used to control the illness if an attack does occur. Anthrax is not transmitted from person-to-person.



I have heard that some people are getting antibiotics from their doctors to take in case of an anthrax attack. Is this recommended?

No, this is a bad idea for a number of reasons. Indiscriminate use of antibiotics could be harmful, particularly for pregnant women and children. Anthrax in its early stages has symptoms similar to influenza. Self-administered use of antibiotics by persons fearing an anthrax release may cause more harm than good. Furthermore, the inappropriate use of antibiotics may lead to antibiotic

resistance of other bacteria. Although there are recommendations for specific antibiotics to use in case of an anthrax attack, these antibiotics are only to be used until tests have been done to determine which drugs are most effective against the strain of the disease in circulation.

Can I get immunized against smallpox?

The last naturally occurring case of smallpox in the world occurred in 1977. The U.S. stopped routine smallpox immunization in 1972 and consequently, drug companies discontinued production of the vaccine. There are approximately 7 million doses of vaccine remaining in the U.S. There is suspicion that rogue nations or groups have stolen the virus from the former Soviet Union. Since we don't know if terrorists have stolen the virus, or if they have, who they would target, we cannot determine who should receive this limited stock of vaccine. In the event of a smallpox outbreak, the vaccine stockpile will be used to control the spread of the disease. The federal government has a contractor developing a new vaccine for a larger stockpile.



I was vaccinated for smallpox when I was a child. Can I still get smallpox?

It is unclear if persons who were vaccinated as children are still protected. It is likely that most vaccinated persons are now susceptible to smallpox.

Isn't there anything we can do to protect ourselves from a bioterrorism attack?

Although there is little an individual can do, there is a great deal we can do as a country. The best protection against a bioterrorism attack is a strong and prepared public health system, health care providers who can recognize an illness caused by a bioterrorism agent, and planning between public health, emergency management and law enforcement. The Illinois Department of Public Health, and local public health agencies have been working for several years to prepare for a bioterrorism attack. The Division of Emergency Management has been an active partner in this planning. Some training of health care providers has taken place and more is planned. Training includes not only information about smallpox and anthrax but the other bioterrorism agents as well. Much work remains to be done, but Illinois has a strong foundation to build upon.

[Transmission Routes of Potential Bioterrorism Agents](#)