



# STATE OF CONNECTICUT

## DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH

**TO:** Danbury Public Schools Community

**FROM:** James L. Hadler, MD, MPH; State Epidemiologist

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Matthew L. Cartter, MD, MPH; Deputy State Epidemiologist

Handwritten signature of Matthew L. Cartter in black ink.

**DATE:** September 11, 2007

**SUBJECT:** Anthrax Update

The Danbury Health Department and the Connecticut Department of Public Health (DPH) are investigating two cases of cutaneous (skin) anthrax involving two members of a Danbury family. Both family members are receiving antibiotics and are recovering from their infections. One family member worked with untreated animal hides, long known as a possible source of naturally occurring anthrax. No other cases have been suspected or confirmed. The risk of exposure was to the immediate family. There is no risk to the general public or to the school population.

Like many families in Danbury, this family is part of the Danbury Public Schools Community. Understandably, some parents have raised concerns about the safety of school children.

Parents should know that anthrax is not spread person-to-person, so having contact with the patients or other members of the family does not place your child at risk. Our investigation has also determined that no items were brought into any school from areas where the processing of contaminated hides took place. Therefore, the Department of Public Health is not recommending any special testing or cleaning of schools or preventive antibiotics for those who work at or attend schools in Danbury. Taking antibiotics unnecessarily can actually create problems – it can cause side effects, interfere with other medications, and can cause drug-resistant (more powerful) strains of bacteria to develop that can't be treated with current medications.

All evidence continues to indicate that the illness that has affected two members of this Danbury family is still an extremely rare event. While we continue to investigate this situation, we have every reason to believe there is no risk to the general public or to the school population.

A fact sheet about anthrax is attached. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the Connecticut Department of Public Health at (860) 509-7994.



# State of Connecticut

## Department of Public Health

### Anthrax Fact Sheet for Public

#### **What is Anthrax?**

- Anthrax is an infectious disease caused by the bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*, which is capable of forming spores. A spore is a cell that is dormant (asleep) but may come to life in the right conditions.
- There are three types of anthrax:
  - Skin (cutaneous)
  - Lungs (inhalational)
  - Digestive (gastrointestinal)

#### **How do you get anthrax?**

Anthrax is not known to spread from person-to-person so you cannot get anthrax by casual contact, sharing office space, living in the same building or by coughing and sneezing.

You can get anthrax by handling products from infected animals and by breathing in the anthrax spores from infected animal products (like wool, hides). You can get gastrointestinal anthrax by eating contaminated meat.

#### **Am I at risk for anthrax from animal hides or hair, or from making a drum from these products?**

Animal hides pose a low risk of cutaneous (skin) anthrax, and an extremely low risk of inhalation anthrax. Exotic animal hides may pose a higher risk for exposure than domestic (U.S.-origin) hides. The risk of contracting *Bacillus anthracis* from handling individual hides is believed to be very low; however, the industrial processing of hides or hair has historically been associated with increased risk of anthrax. Such industrial handling of large numbers of hides or hair from multiple animals results in prolonged direct contact with contaminated materials, often in enclosed or poorly ventilated settings. Among the 236 cases of anthrax reported to CDC from 1955 to 1999, 153 (65%) were associated with industrial handling of animal hide or hair. Only 9 of the 153 cases (6%) associated with industrial handling of hair or hide were inhalation anthrax.

#### **How can I further protect myself if I work with hides that may be potentially contaminated with anthrax spores?**

Persons engaged in making drums should only use animal hides that have been processed to reduce the chance of infectious disease transmission. Persons with ongoing exposure to untreated animal hides should consult with a professional to determine appropriate personal protective equipment and risk mitigation measures. While these measures may help reduce the risk of acquiring anthrax infection, they cannot be presumed to eliminate it. Any unexplained febrile illness or skin lesions should immediately be reported to a healthcare professional, and the history of contact with untanned or untreated animal hides should be explained.

**What are the symptoms of anthrax?**

For skin (cutaneous) anthrax, the first symptom is a skin sore that develops into a blister. The blister then develops into a skin ulcer with a black area in the center. The sore, blister and ulcer do not hurt.

For lung (inhalational) anthrax, the first symptoms may resemble the common cold. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing difficulties and a severe pneumonia.

For digestive (gastrointestinal) anthrax, the first symptoms are nausea, loss of appetite, bloody diarrhea, and fever, followed by bad stomach pain.

**How soon do infected people get sick?**

Symptoms can appear within 7 days of coming in contact with the bacterium for all three types of anthrax.

**How is anthrax treated?**

Antibiotics are used to treat all three types of anthrax. Different antibiotics can be used for treatment and for prophylaxis of an anthrax infection.

**Do I need to get antibiotics?**

Antibiotics for treatment and prophylaxis should only be given if you have a known exposure to the bacterium. Otherwise, taking antibiotics unnecessarily can be problematic. The course of antibiotic treatment to prevent anthrax infection is long (60 days) and people may experience side effects. Although most side effects are mild, severe side effects may occur (such as diarrhea, abdominal symptoms, rash, and allergic reactions) and the use of antibiotics may interfere with other medications you may currently be taking. In addition, the inappropriate use of antibiotics may cause the development of antibiotic-resistant strains of bacteria.

**What if I want more information?**

More information on anthrax can be obtained by calling the Department of Public Health at 860-509-7994, the Danbury Health Department at 203-797-4625, or at the following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website:

<http://www.cdc.gov/search.do?queryText=anthrax&action=search>