



CARSON CITY FIRE DEPARTMENT

"Service with Pride, Commitment, Compassion"

12/16/2008

To: All Carson City Employees
From: Capt. McCracken
Re: White Powder Incidents- Do's and Don'ts

Attention Employees:

With the recent increase in white powder incidents that we have experienced here in Carson City over the last couple of weeks, we wanted to send out some information reminding everyone what to do if you come across such a package or envelope. The best approach we can take in dealing with the threat is to know more about anthrax, what to look for, and what to do.

Anthrax is a bacterial disease caused by *Bacillus Anthracis*. Anthrax occurs in animals, including goats, sheep, cattle, and horses. It is an invisible bacteria that can live in soil, water, and dead animals. Anthrax is not contagious and can not be spread from person to person. It is treatable and antibiotics are effective. You can contract anthrax either through skin contact or inhalation. The disease first appears as flu-like symptoms. This anthrax bacteria is usually a brownish, grainy substance that has been placed in a package or envelope and sent through the mail for distribution.

Please take time to read the attached information. The sheet includes general precautions, typical characteristics of a suspicious letter or package, and what to do if you receive such a package. Please feel free to contact me if there are any other questions or concerns that you have regarding this subject or anything else.

Mike McCracken
Training Captain
Carson City, Nevada Fire Department

If you have questions, please call the Fire Department Head Quarters at 887-2210

Carson City Fire Department

Common Questions about Anthrax

Q. Can a person get screened or tested for anthrax?

A. There is no screening test for anthrax; there is no test that a doctor can do for you that says you've been exposed to or carry it. The only way that it can be determined is through a public health investigation. And in those circumstances, for example, when people who work in a given office or on a given floor have been exposed, public health officials make great and aggressive efforts to inform them whether they have been exposed or not, and thus their need for antibiotics. But, the tests that you read about or hear about such as blood tests or nasal swabs or other tests, are not tests to determine whether an individual should be treated. These nasal swabs and environmental tests are merely to determine the extent of exposure in a given building or workplace.

Q. Should I be vaccinated against anthrax?

A. No. Routine vaccination against anthrax is not recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The existing national stockpile of anthrax vaccine is limited, and will be directed for use in the event of an acute need.

Currently, and for the last several years, anthrax vaccination has been recommended only for the following people, who are more likely than most of us to be exposed to anthrax:

- Persons who work directly with the organism in the laboratory.
- Persons who handle potentially infected animal products.
- Certain military personnel deployed to areas of the world with high risk for exposure to the organism.

Q. What can the average person do to protect himself/herself from anthrax?

A. The best approach to take in dealing with anthrax, is to know a little bit more about anthrax.

- It's not contagious, it doesn't spread from person-to-person.
- 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.
- Those antibiotics are very effective in preventing a person from ever getting the disease once exposed.
- If someone does develop cutaneous (skin) anthrax, for example, it's readily treatable.

Q. What are the symptoms of anthrax?

A. There are three clinical presentations of anthrax, largely determined by the route of entry of the anthrax into the human body and some of the clinical manifestations. The symptoms are: cutaneous anthrax, where your skin surface is exposed and you develop a skin lesion; inhalation

anthrax in which you breathe in the particles; and, gastrointestinal anthrax in which you ingest the particles or eat the particles.

Cutaneous anthrax looks like a brown recluse spider bite. In some cases it begins like a swelling on the skin. It can be anywhere, but often on the arms or hands. The swelling then develops a central area of ulceration or a depression. Then, a scab or what we call an eschar, a very dark, blackish-brown scab, forms over that central area. It can be painless and it may or may not be accompanied by a fever.

Q. Is anthrax contagious?

A. Anthrax cannot be spread from person-to-person. One person is not contagious to another person. We can only get it from the mechanisms of exposure to the skin, breathing it or eating it.

Q. What should an individual do about suspicious mail?

A. If you find something suspicious in your mail - be it a package or a letter - remain calm. If you've picked it up, put it down. If you have a plastic bag or envelope handy just slip it in it and close it. If you don't have such a plastic item available, cover it with a towel, a cloth or even a newspaper - just cover it so that it is protected over its borders. Wash your hands with soap and water. Call local law enforcement (911) and describe what you've got and ask them come and help you.

Q. What does anthrax look like?

A. All the material that has tested positive so far has been a brownish, grainy substance. Experts say this means it is likely a crude preparation. A more sophisticated lab could put it into a very fine white powder.

Q. What are the different kinds of anthrax disease?

A. More than 95 percent of cases are cutaneous or skin infection. If bacterial spores get into the lungs, they can cause the much rarer but much more deadly inhalation disease.

Q. What are the symptoms of skin exposure to anthrax?

A. It begins with a swollen area on the skin - similar to a large insect bite. It swells more over several days and eventually a black scab forms in the center. Patients often have fever and a headache.

Q. How do I know to suspect anthrax?

A. There is very little reason to suspect you've been exposed unless there has been a specific incident where you live or work. That is why the public health system has to be on alert for a possible attack.

Q. How close to anthrax spores do I have to be to become infected?

A. Anthrax has to be inhaled in the lungs or pass through a cut in the skin to cause disease - simply touching them will not make you sick.

Q. How long is the time from exposure to infection?

A. Anthrax symptoms usually appear in one to six days.

Q. Can I get anthrax from eating or drinking?

A. Only very rarely. Only when people eat meat from anthrax-infected animals. Otherwise it is not a threat in water or food.

Q. If I somehow contract anthrax can it be treated?

A. Yes, if anthrax is treated in the first few days for the inhalation form - or the first weeks for the skin form - it is almost always curable.

Q. What are the treatments?

A. We've heard a lot about the antibiotic Cipro as the first-line drug. However, it's important to reiterate that many common antibiotics including doxycycline and penicillin/amoxicillin are equally effective against anthrax and may be the better drug to protect against resistant organisms.

Some general precautions for handling mail are:

- Examine unopened envelopes and packages and look for suspicious features
- Handle incoming mail in a designated area
- The USPS recommends protective gloves should be worn while handling mail
- Avoid touching your skin, eyes, or other mucous membranes
- Hands should be thoroughly washed with soap and water, especially before eating or drinking
- Use a letter opener to open mail
- Restrict mail room access to authorized persons only

Typical characteristics of a suspicious letter include:

- Powdery substance felt through or appearing on the outside of the letter or package
- Inappropriate or unusual labeling
- Excessive postage
- Handwritten or poorly typed addresses
- Misspelling of common words
- Strange return address or no return address
- Incorrect titles or title without a name
- Not addressed to a specific person
- Marked with restrictions, such as “Personal,” “Confidential,” “to be opened by addressee only,” or “Do not x-ray.”
- Marked with any threatening language
- Post marked from a city or state that does not match the return address
- Oily stains, discolorations, or odor
- Lop-sided or uneven envelope
- Excessive packaging material such as masking tape and string
- Excessive weight

What to do if you receive an envelope or package with a white powder/anthrax threat:

- Do not open the mail piece if you are suspicious of the contents
- Do not handle the mail piece or package suspected of contamination
- Avoid any further contact with the package
- Do not attempt to clean up the powder if any spills out
- Make sure that damaged or suspicious items are isolated and the immediate area is cordoned off
- Ensure that all persons who have touched the mail piece wash any exposed skin including hands, arms, and face vigorously with soap and water
- Call 9-1-1 immediately
- List all persons who have touched the mail piece and isolate them in a separate area until cleared by responders. Give this information to the responders that are investigating the incident

What to do after first responders arrive:

- Identify yourself as being potentially contaminated and avoid contact with them
- Give all pertinent information to the responders
- Tell them the number of potentially contaminated people
- Stay in one area, do not roam, and be patient.