

Ohio Department of Health: Frequently Asked Questions on BIOTERRORISM

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How likely is a bioterrorist attack?

An attack with a bacteria or virus spread in the air would be difficult to carry off presently. The people of this country are at a heightened level of awareness. It is difficult to make the bacteria or virus survive its spread through the air. Terrorist have tried unsuccessfully to attack with biologics in the past (e.g., the Aum Shin Ryko cult that ended up releasing the chemical Sarin in Japan.)

What is the health department doing to protect the public and prepare for bioterrorism?

Ohio has been in the business of preparing a response to biological and chemical threat for several years. Ohio was one of the first states to receive monies from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to develop planning aimed at protecting the health of the population should an event occur.

The Ohio Department of Health partners with your local health department and other state agencies to assure a rapid response to threats and hazards within communities. This preparation includes:

- Assuring planning occurs at the local level;
- Training physicians, nurses, and other health care providers;
- Launching the Ohio Disease Reporting System (September 2001) for detection and electronic reporting of disease on a daily basis;
- Lab readiness to detect biological agents as quickly as possible;
- Health Alert Network, a system of multiple communications, to keep health care providers informed about events across the state and nation and send out emergency alerts.
- Planning for delivery of CDC's National Pharmaceutical Stockpile (NPS) (treatments and supplies in case of an attack) and working with your local planners to assure readiness of medications prior to NPS arrival.

Are vaccinations recommended in case of a bioterrorism threat?

There are no vaccines being recommended for the public. Please see below for more specific information on anthrax and smallpox vaccines.

What is smallpox?

Smallpox is a disease caused by the *Variola* virus. One out of three people who get the disease have died in the past. Smallpox is spread from person to person, usually after the sick person develops a fever and a rash. The rash works itself from the face, arms and legs onto the trunk of the body. There is no treatment for smallpox, but the Smallpox vaccine provides good protection and serves to stop the spread of the disease.

Are vaccines for smallpox available and should I get vaccinated?

Smallpox disease was stamped out worldwide in 1980 and vaccination stopped everywhere in the world in 1983. The U.S. Public Health Service does maintain an emergency stockpile of doses. There is a program to produce more vaccine, started in 2000. While many vaccines must be

given weeks or months before a person is exposed to infection, the smallpox vaccine can give protection after a person is exposed if administered in 2-4 days after exposure.

If I was vaccinated against smallpox before 1980, am I still protected?

Probably not. The smallpox vaccine wears off in most people after 10 years. If health authorities determine that you have been exposed to smallpox or are at risk of infection, the recommendation would be that you are re-vaccinated immediately.

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a disease caused by bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*, and would most likely be spread by air in a bioterrorism attack. As early as a day to two after and clear up to seven weeks after exposure, the spores that a person breathes in grow rapidly and cause fever, difficult breathing, and a generally make the patient miserable. Death typically occurs within several days without medical treatment. Antibiotics can stop the disease if they are taken at the time the anthrax spores begin to grow or soon thereafter. Anthrax is not contagious. It does not spread from person to person.

Should I have my own supply of antibiotics?

Bioterrorists could carry out an attack using a number of different germs. There is no antibiotic that is effective against all the diseases that they might choose. Thus, no single pill can protect against all types of biological weapon attacks. Also keep in mind that your antibiotic supply has a limited "shelf life" and can weaken after the expiration date.

Should I buy a gas mask?

No. A mask will only protect you if you are wearing it at the exact moment an attack occurs. A biologic attack is most likely to be "covert" or without anyone knowing it. That would mean that you need to have your mask on 24 hours a day seven days a week. Gas masks were designed to protect against chemicals and must be fitted to work. People suffocated in Israel during Desert Storm when they didn't put the mask on properly.

Is it safe for me to drink water from the tap?

It would be VERY difficult for a bioterrorist to contaminate our drinking water supplies to cause widespread illness. There are two reasons. First of all, huge amounts of water are pumped daily from our reservoirs, most used for industrial and other purposes. Anything deliberately put into the water supply would be greatly diluted. Secondly, water treatment facilities routinely filter the water supply and add chlorine to kill germs.

How can I prepare my family and myself for a bioterrorism threat?

Unfortunately, there is presently little that individuals can do in advance to protect themselves from a bioterrorist attack. However, there is much that government agencies, health care facilities, and public health departments can and should be doing to improve our state's capacity to protect the public following an attack. In each community, your local health department is responsible for helping protect your community against outbreaks of infectious disease, whether that disease occurs in nature or because it is released by a terrorist. Your health department can assist you with questions and concerns you may have about bioterrorism.

Although the Ohio Department of Health does not recommend specific bioterrorism-related precautions for the public. We do, however, recommend that families have a disaster plan in place for any event (e.g., flood, tornado) that includes these emergency supplies:

- Three day supply of water;
- Clothing, blankets, and sleeping bags;
- First aid kit that includes prescription medications;
- Battery-powered radio and flashlight with extra batteries;
- Sanitation supplies; and
- Special needs items for infants, older adults, or disabled family members.

Should a bioterrorism event occur, it is important that you listen to the instructions of emergency and public health workers. They will need your cooperation to perform their duties as rapidly and successfully as possible.

For additional information please visit the ODH Web Site www.odh.state.oh.us or call your local health department.