



Federal Occupational Health

Update: Flu or Anthrax?

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As we approach the cold and flu season, we continue to receive numerous questions about how to differentiate between the symptoms of these very common ailments and those of the more highly publicized but still extremely rare disease anthrax. To date, only 21 cases of confirmed or suspected cases of anthrax have been reported in the U.S., while the flu accounts for over 20,000 **deaths** and more than 100,000 hospitalizations each year. Therefore, suffice it to say that most cases of flu-like symptoms will not be caused by anthrax.

The chart below outlines some common and distinguishing features between the common cold, the flu and anthrax. Some important points to keep in mind include:

- Colds and flu are self-limiting illnesses; they improve in a few days even without treatment
- Anthrax, especially inhaled, does not resolve and gets progressively worse over time
- Nasal symptoms such as a runny nose and congestion are **not** associated with anthrax
- Not everyone who gets a cold or flu-like symptoms needs to visit their doctor
- People with flu-like symptoms **AND** known or suspected exposure to anthrax should seek medical attention immediately

<i>Symptom/Characteristic</i>	<i>Cold</i>	<i>Flu</i>	<i>Anthrax (Inhaled)</i>	<i>Anthrax (Cutaneous)</i>
Duration	3-5 days	3-5 days	>7 days	>7 days
Fever/chills/sweats	-	+++	+++	+
Nasal congestion/stuffy or runny nose	+++	++	-	-
Sore throat	+++	++	+	-
Dry cough	+++	++	++	++
Muscle/body aches	-	++	++	++
Fatigue/weakness	+	++	+++	+
Severe headache/Neck stiffness	-	+	+++	-
Rash/blister/ulcer on skin	-	-	-	+++
Nausea/vomiting/stomach pain	-	-	++	-
Shortness of breath/ Difficulty breathing	-	-	+++	-
Chest tightness/heaviness	-	-	+++	-

--- **not present** + **occasionally present** ++ **commonly present** +++ **very common**

What about the flu shot and anthrax?

Influenza vaccine is the best way to prevent influenza and its severe complications, including pneumonia and death and is urged for those at high risk – such as people 65 and older and those with certain chronic medical conditions, regardless of age. While anyone who wants to prevent the flu or at least minimize its symptoms and duration may receive the vaccine, it is important that these high risk groups receive the highest priority. The CDC does **not recommend** that influenza vaccination be considered as a way to avoid confusing the flu with suspected anthrax illness. Remember, since the flu shot only prevents 70-90% of influenza infections, some people will still get the flu and its associated symptoms. The optimal time to receive the flu shot is now through December. People who are taking preventive antibiotics for potential exposure to anthrax may receive the vaccine at any time.