What is anthrax?
Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by the spore-forming bacterium Bacillus anthracis. Anthrax most commonly occurs in warm-blooded animals, but can also infect humans when they are exposed to infected animals or tissue from infected animals. Symptoms of disease vary depending on how the disease was contracted, but symptoms usually occur within seven days of exposure. Anthrax infection can occur in three forms: cutaneous (skin), inhalation, and gastrointestinal. Person-to-person spread of anthrax rarely occurs.

Where is anthrax usually found?
Although anthrax can be found anywhere in the world, it is most common in agricultural regions where it occurs in wild and domestic animals, including cattle, sheep, goats, camels, antelopes and other herbivores. Areas of the world currently listed as high risk are South and Central America, Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East.

How is anthrax spread?
Anthrax is not contagious; the illness cannot be spread from person to person. B. anthracis spores can live in the soil for many years. Humans can become infected with anthrax by handling products from infected animals or by inhaling anthrax spores from contaminated animal products. Eating under cooked meat from infected animals can also spread anthrax. It is uncommon to find infected animals in the United States.

Can anthrax be used as a biological weapon?
Anthrax spores can be used as a bioterrorist weapon, as was the case in 2001, when Bacillus anthracis spores were intentionally distributed through the postal system, causing 22 cases of anthrax, including 5 deaths. Several nations are believed to have offensive biological weapon programs, including producing and weaponizing anthrax. Experts believe that the manufacture of a lethal anthrax aerosol is beyond the capability of individuals or groups without access to advanced biotechnology.

Is there a treatment for anthrax?
Doctors can prescribe effective antibiotics. Early antibiotic use is essential for the treatment of inhalation anthrax because of the rapid course of the disease. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal. If there were an attack using anthrax against the civilian population, antibiotics would be used to prevent deaths from anthrax. These antibiotics would be rapidly distributed to those who may have been exposed. An initial 10 day course of antibiotics will be distributed to the population that may have been exposed. Additional 50 day course of antibiotics maybe supplied if anthrax attack is confirmed. Only individuals directly exposed to the anthrax release will receive the additional 50 day course treatment. There is no need to treat the contacts of a person with anthrax.

Is anthrax vaccine available?
The anthrax vaccine is not recommended for the general public or health care providers. It is only used for military personnel deployed to areas of the world with a high risk for exposure.

For further information, contact the Oklahoma City-County Health Department
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