

Basic Fact Sheet – Anthrax in Animals
Texas Department of Health, Zoonosis Control Division

What is anthrax?

Anthrax is an infectious (can be spread) disease caused by spore-forming bacteria (*Bacillus anthracis*). It occurs naturally in animals in the southern and southwestern parts of Texas.

How can an animal get anthrax?

Hoofed animals, such as deer, cattle, goats, and sheep, are the main animals affected by this disease. They usually get the disease by swallowing anthrax spores while grazing on pasture contaminated (made impure) with anthrax spores. Inhaling (breathing in) the spores, which are odorless, colorless, and tasteless, may also cause infection in animals and people. In the case of terrorism, large numbers of anthrax spores may be released into the air. Carnivores, including dogs and cats, are rarely infected. Amphibians, reptiles, fish, and most birds do not get anthrax.

What are the signs of anthrax disease in animals?

Signs of the illness usually appear 3 to 7 days after the spores are swallowed or inhaled. Once signs begin in animals, they usually die within two days. Infected animals may stagger, have difficulty breathing, tremble, and finally collapse and die within a few hours. Sometimes animals may have a fever and a period of excitement followed by staggering, depression, unconsciousness (lacking awareness), difficulty breathing, seizures, and death. Dark blood may ooze from the mouth, nose, and anus. Signs in pigs, dogs, and cats may be less serious.

How is anthrax diagnosed?

A diagnosis is made by finding the anthrax bacteria or antibodies to anthrax in the blood of infected animals through laboratory tests.

How is anthrax treated?

It is usually hopeless to treat animals that are sick. Sometimes, if the disease is detected soon after infection, antibiotics, along with nursing care, may help.

Is an anthrax vaccine available?

A vaccine for livestock is commonly used in areas that have anthrax. To be effective, it must be used before the animal is exposed to the bacteria. The vaccine for livestock is not the same as the one for humans. The human vaccine has limited availability, such as for military personnel. No vaccine is available for pets.

Can infected animals spread anthrax?

Yes. Handling a dead or sick animal or eating a dead animal infected with anthrax can spread anthrax to humans and other animals. Anthrax is not spread by sneezing or coughing. Person-to-person spread of the disease is unlikely.

What should be done with animals that die of anthrax?

Animals that die of anthrax can contaminate the soil with anthrax spores, so the bodies should be burned, not buried.

How can I protect my animals and myself?

Wear a mask and gloves when handling sick or dead animals. Vaccinate livestock as recommended.