

Cutaneous anthrax in Injection Drug Users

What is cutaneous anthrax?

Cutaneous (skin) anthrax is one of the three forms of anthrax that occurs when bacterial spores enter a cut or abrasion on the skin. Cutaneous anthrax is the most common form of anthrax accounting for 95% of cases.

What are the symptoms of cutaneous anthrax?

Cutaneous (skin) infection usually begins as a raised itchy bump that resembles an insect bite. Within 1-2 days it develops into a clear blister and then a painless ulcer. The ulcer is usually 1-3 cm across with a typical black necrotic (dying) area in the center. Surrounding tissues and lymph glands may swell. About 20% of untreated cases of cutaneous anthrax may result in death. Deaths are rare with appropriate antimicrobial therapy. Symptoms of cutaneous anthrax usually occur within 7 days of infection.

How do Injection Drug Users get cutaneous anthrax?

Cutaneous anthrax, which usually starts as a localized infection, may look slightly different in injection drug users. Injection drug users with anthrax infection are more likely to have systemic effects early on in the disease. This may be due to the possibility of injecting contaminated material deep into the tissues, and developing a systemic infection (see below) as a result. They may also develop an infection and abscess deep under the skin or in the muscle where the drug was injected. Skin and injection site infections associated with injection drug use are common and do not necessarily mean the person has anthrax.

What is systemic infection?

Systemic infection means that bacteria are living throughout the body in more than one body system. Systemic infections typically make a person sicker and are more difficult to treat than a local infection. There is a risk of systemic infection associated with injection drug use if infected material is injected deep into the tissues.

How is cutaneous anthrax treated?

Cutaneous anthrax is treated with aggressive antibacterial and supportive therapy. This is because of the likelihood of systemic infection. Rapid and aggressive treatment is important.

What should I do if I think I have cutaneous anthrax?

If you are sick, have blisters or suspicious lesions, and you are a drug user, see your doctor immediately.

Is cutaneous anthrax contagious?

Cutaneous anthrax has very rarely been passed from one person to another. Discharges from skin lesions may contain anthrax bacteria. Spreading cutaneous anthrax between people is very unlikely. Spreading over types of anthrax has never been reported.