

Bioterrorism

What is 'bioterrorism'?

Bioterrorism, or a biological attack, is the intentional release of germs or other biological substances such as toxins and poisons that can cause illness and death among people. The possibility also exists for a terrorist to use new, genetically- engineered agents that are harder to treat.

What are the chances that a bioterrorist attack will happen in my hometown?

No one really knows what the chances are, so it is important for cities, counties and the state to have plans in place to respond quickly. There is no need for panic, but it is wise to be prepared.

What can I do to protect myself and my family?

Pay attention to your own health and that of your family just as you do now. You will know best what health problems are unusual for you and your family. Use common sense and practice good hygiene and cleanliness to avoid spreading germs.

Report any unusual symptoms or illnesses right away to your doctor. If you know a number of people who have unusual symptoms or illness or who are sick at unusual times of the year, you may report these to your local health department.

In addition, each family should have a disaster plan for emergencies. Include:

- A three-day supply of water and food that will not spoil;
- Clothing, blankets and sleeping bags for all family members;
- First aid kit with any prescription medications;
- Battery-powered radio and flashlights with extra batteries;
- Extra set of car keys and a credit card, cash or traveler's checks;
- Sanitation supplies;
- Special items for infants, elderly or disabled family members;
- An extra pair of glasses.

What is the Department of State Health Services doing to protect the public?

The Department of State Health Services works with your local health department and other local, state and federal agencies to respond rapidly to any biological and chemical threats or hazards, whether they are naturally occurring or intentionally released. Should a bioterrorism event happen, listen to what emergency and public health workers tell you to do. Your cooperation is very important.

Where can I get more information?

Contact your local health department. Additional information on bioterrorism can be found on the CDC Web site at www.bt.cdc.gov.

Are biological weapons dangerous?

Biological weapons can be very harmful. Some of these agents make people sick; others can lead to death.

Many agents must be breathed in, enter through a cut in the skin or be eaten to make you sick. Some biological agents, such as anthrax, do not cause contagious diseases. Others, such as the smallpox virus, can lead to diseases that can pass from person to person. In some instances, even the smallest amounts of these agents can be deadly.

How can I tell a bioterrorist attack from a naturally occurring outbreak?

Unlike an explosion, a biological attack may happen secretly and may not be easy to spot. Healthcare workers will need to recognize unusual patterns of illnesses and match the symptoms of early victims with a particular biological agent. Most people will learn about a bioterrorist attack through information they hear or read from emergency and health leaders.

In the event of a biological attack, public health officials may not immediately be able to provide information on what you should do. It will take time to learn exactly what the illness is, how it should be treated, and who is in danger. However, you should watch TV, listen to the radio, read the newspaper or check the Internet for official news including the following:

- Are you in the group or area authorities consider in danger?
- What are the signs and symptoms of the disease?
- Are medications or vaccines being distributed?
- Is so, where? Who should get them?
- Where should you seek emergency medical care if you become sick?
- How many bacterial and chemical agents do I need to worry about?

While there are many germs and chemicals, only a few dozen agents are thought to be a possibility to use in a biological attack. Fortunately, spreading them to cause the most exposure and injury or illness is not a simple job.

How contagious are these biological agents?

Of all the possible biological weapons, only plague, smallpox and viral hemorrhagic fevers are easily spread from person to person through the air. However, as a precaution, all potential victims of a biological weapon should be isolated.