



## Anthrax Alerts Spreading Around the World

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The threat of anthrax powders in mail is causing some postal workers to wear masks like this mailman in Taiwan. Photograph © 2001 by BBC.

### Update October 18 -

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Preliminary tests show the anthrax sent to New York and Florida were the same strain. Thirty-one people at the Capitol complex in Washington, including aides to Sen. Tom Daschle and to Sen. Russell Feingold, and two Capitol police officers, tested positive for exposure to a deliberately manufactured and dangerous anthrax strain. To date, four people have contracted anthrax (Robert Stevens a American Media died on October 5 after inhaling anthrax spores; another American Media employee is being treated for inhalation anthrax; Tom Brokaw's assistant and ABC producer's 7-month-old baby contracted skin anthrax) and 40 others have been exposed to anthrax spores, including the thirty-one in the Capitol.

### Update October 16 -

Seven-month-old son of ABC producer contracted cutaneous anthrax within 24 hours of a September 28 visit to the ABC news room in New York City. Baby's ill health is improving with antibiotic treatment.

**October 15, 2001** - A letter opened today in the office of U. S. Senate Majority Leader, Tom Daschle, contained powder that tested positive for anthrax. The postmark was Trenton, New Jersey. Another letter that tested positive for anthrax was also postmarked from Trenton, New Jersey on September 18 to NBC News Anchorman Tom Brokaw and opened by his assistant, Erin O'Connor, who contracted cutaneous anthrax.

### Saturday, October 13,

the governor of Nevada confirmed that an envelope postmarked from Malaysia sent to the Microsoft company in Reno, Nevada did contain anthrax spores. The Center for Disease Control first contradicted those findings and then further testing confirmed presence of anthrax.

And five more people have tested positive for anthrax exposure in Boca Raton, Florida at American Media which publishes the tabloid newspapers such as The Sun and National Enquirer where two others also tested positive for exposure last week. Robert Stevens who died in Boca Raton, Florida on October 5 worked for The Sun in the American Media building. He had the most deadly

form of anthrax known as "inhalation anthrax" caused by breathing in dry spores from the bacteria. Prior to this, there had not been a case of confirmed inhalation anthrax in the United States since 1976. Anthrax spores were also found on the computer keyboard Mr. Stevens used and in the mail room where two other employees tested positive for anthrax. This brings the total to eight American Media employees who have been exposed to the dangerous bacteria.

### **On Friday, October 12,**

the FBI announced that both The New York Times and NBC had received mail containing suspicious white powder. There were at least two threatening envelopes addressed to Tom Brokaw containing powder, the one dated September 18 postmarked from New Jersey. A second dated September 25th was postmarked from St. Petersburg, Florida. The September 25th letter was handled by Mr. Brokaw's assistant, Erin O'Connor, and she turned that letter over to authorities. Subsequently, she developed a huge, softball-size black scab on her arm which puzzled experts in a series of medical tests. Finally, the Center for Disease Control confirmed the black scab is cutaneous anthrax in which the bacteria gets into the skin through a scratch or cut. Ms. O'Connor has been on antibiotics and is progressing well, but strangely the powder in that September 25th letter has not yet tested positive for anthrax, perhaps because too much spilled out when it was first opened.

However, the second September 18th letter tested positive and another NBC employee who handled it is now under medical treatment. At least 500 NBC employees lined up for testing, and the affected third floor "Nightly News" offices at Rockefeller Center were closed off.

Another suspicious package with a threatening letter was sent to writer Judith Miller at The New York Times, also postmarked from St. Petersburg, Florida. And on Friday in Washington, D. C, employees in a State Department office that handles congressional correspondence discovered a white powder. The office was closed off, but no evacuations were considered necessary. The powder is being analyzed.

### **Suspicious Powders Around The World**

**Argentina** - At least a dozen people were overcome with eye irritation and coughing at polling stations in Buenos Aires after white powder was found.

**Canada** - An envelope received at the Parliament Building contained powder. Thirty-five employees were sent to medical authorities for testing and decontamination.

**France** - Suspicious powder was found in mail received at the French Space Agency and the College de France, a research institute. Hundreds of people evacuated by police went to medical authorities to be tested for anthrax exposure.

**Germany** - White powder was found in the mail room where Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder has offices. Schroeder has supported the U. S. strikes against Afghanistan, but many terrorists sympathetic to Osama bin Laden have been traced to Germany. Tests are being done on the powder.

**Israel** - Six suspicious letters have been tested, but found to be negative for anthrax. Then more powder was found on an Israeli cargo plane that is also being tested for anthrax.

**Switzerland** - Another letter containing unidentified powder was opened by a man working for a Swiss pharmaceutical company. He is now under medical treatment as a precaution.

## Security Increases

South Korea plans to run bioterrorism drills in its subway stations, cinemas, and department stores in November and has asked public and private facilities to stock up on gas masks. In Japan, post offices are using x-ray machines to screen all international mail and employees in Tokyo are now wearing masks.

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## **More Information:**



*Bacillus anthracis*, anthrax bacteria, can form stable spores that are resistant to harsh conditions and extreme temperatures.  
Photomicrograph courtesy University of Michigan.

There are three categories of anthrax disease and none is infectious person-to-person:

- 1) **Cutaneous anthrax** - bacteria or its spores (hibernating bacteria protected by hardened sheaths) naturally found in soil or on animals such as sheep get into cuts or scratches in skin and over two to six days spread into a pimple that becomes a blister that becomes a large, depressed black scab. The word anthrax is Greek for "coal" because of its blackness. With antibiotic treatment, cutaneous anthrax can be cured. Without treatment, the mortality rate can be 20%.
- 2) **Ingestion/gastrointestinal anthrax** - bacteria form on spoiled, undercooked meat which when eaten make people extremely ill and can cause death. Symptoms include nausea, abdominal pain, vomiting, low energy and bloody diarrhea. Antibiotics can help if treatment is early in the disease. But mortality rates are high because early diagnosis is difficult. To date, no cases of gastrointestinal anthrax have been reported in the U. S.
- 3) **Inhalation anthrax** - dry anthrax spores can be breathed deep into the lungs. If enough - approximately 8,000 to 10,000 spores - are inhaled, the spores germinate into anthracis bacteria. First symptoms are like a flu with fever, dry cough and chest pain anywhere from six to 45 days after exposure. The maturing bacteria produce lethal toxins that spread into the bloodstream and cause systemic shock and collapse of body systems resulting in death. Inhalation anthrax death rate exceeds 90%.

## Facts about Anthrax from the Center for Disease Control:

"Anthrax is an acute infectious disease caused by the spore-forming bacterium *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax most commonly occurs in hooved mammals and can also infect humans.

Symptoms of disease vary depending on how the disease was contracted, but usually occur within 7 days after exposure. The

serious forms of human anthrax are inhalation anthrax, cutaneous anthrax,  
and intestinal anthrax.

Initial symptoms of inhalation anthrax infection may resemble a common cold. After several days, the symptoms may progress to severe breathing problems and shock. Inhalation anthrax is often fatal.

The intestinal disease form of anthrax may follow the consumption of contaminated food and is characterized by an acute inflammation of the intestinal tract. Initial signs of nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting, and fever are followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.

Direct person-to-person spread of anthrax is extremely unlikely, if it occurs at all. Therefore, there is no need to immunize or treat contacts of persons ill with anthrax, such as household contacts, friends, or coworkers, unless they also were also exposed to the same source of infection.

In persons exposed to anthrax, infection can be prevented with antibiotic treatment.

Early antibiotic treatment of anthrax is essential - delay lessens chances for survival. Anthrax usually is susceptible to penicillin, doxycycline, and fluoroquinolones.

An anthrax vaccine also can prevent infection. Vaccination against anthrax is not recommended for the general public to prevent disease and is not available."

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## Websites:

<http://www.nanobio.com/>

<http://nano.med.umich.edu/>

<http://www.bt.cdc.gov/Agent/Anthrax/Anthrax.asp>

## Credits

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