

Bioterrorism: Information and Resources for Patients

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

1. Can I get vaccinated?

There are no available vaccines for the potential agents of bioterrorism. The government has a supply of vaccines, which will be released if needed, but they are not available otherwise. This includes smallpox and anthrax. In addition, anthrax vaccine has never been shown to be effective in respiratory anthrax (the form an attack would take) and has some potential serious side effects.

2. Should my doctor prescribe preventive antibiotics against anthrax, plague, or other bioterrorist threat diseases?

There is no single antibiotic to protect against an attack, and it is difficult to predict what would be needed and when. No unusual illnesses or deaths suggestive of bioterrorism have been reported in California, nor have there been any credible threats of bioterrorism. Therefore, preventive antibiotics are not needed for anthrax, plague, or any other bioterrorist threat diseases, and public health officials do not recommend prescribing them. Furthermore, inappropriate use of antibiotics can lead to unnecessary harmful side effects and to development of antibiotic-resistant organisms. If there is an attack, public health authorities have plans to disseminate information and facilitate supplies of needed medications.

3. How can I tell if a bioterrorist attack has occurred?

There would be multiple suddenly serious ill, otherwise healthy persons. The public health authorities would be notified immediately and you would hear it via the media. You should seek care for any normal reason you would seek care, such as severe illness, severe symptoms or persistent symptoms.

4. How can I be sure my health care needs will be met if a bioterrorist attack occurs?

If a bioterrorist attack were to occur, local and state public health departments will be responsible for disseminating uniform treatment guidelines appropriate to the situation and for ensuring coordinated and rapid distribution of antibiotics to medical facilities, medical and other response personnel, and to exposed or ill members of the general public.

The federal government has assembled a National Pharmaceutical Stockpile (NPS) to supplement local and state resources. The NPS includes immediate response Push Packages that are caches of pharmaceuticals, antidotes, and medical supplies designed to address a variety of biologic or chemical agents. The Push Packages are positioned in secure regional warehouses ready for immediate deployment to the airfield closest to the affected area within 12 hours of the federal decision to release NPS assets. This program is supplemented with a Vendor Managed Inventory program that ensures the continual supply of pharmaceuticals, antidotes, and medical supplies to an affected area when the NPS has been depleted.

Web-based resources for patients

1. American Psychological Association. The APA web site contains the following useful articles:
 - "Coping with Terrorism." <http://www.helping.apa.org/daily/terrorism.html>
 - "Managing Traumatic Stress: Tips for Recovering From Disasters and Other Traumatic Events." <http://www.helping.apa.org/daily/traumaticstress.html>
 - "Reactions and Guidelines for Children Following Trauma/Disaster." <http://www.helping.apa.org/daily/ptguidelines.html>
2. David Baldwin's Trauma Information web site. This comprehensive site contains a variety of handouts and links to useful information from the American Red Cross, the American Psychological Association, the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and various mental health departments and organizations. <http://www.trauma-pages.com/pg5.htm>