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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ON BIOTERRORISM  
10/4/01

**How likely is a Bio-terrorist attack?**

For years experts have been concerned about the possibility of a biologic attack. There has been evidence that certain countries or groups have experimented with bacteria, virus, and toxins in order to intentionally harm large numbers of people. There has been no evidence that an attack has ever occurred. While some of the agents may be easy to get, it is difficult to spread them to a large population in the quantities needed to make people ill.

An attack with bacteria or virus spread in the air would be extremely unlikely. It is difficult to make bacteria or virus that will survive being spread through the air. Terrorists have tried unsuccessfully to attack with biologic agents in the past.

**How would we know if an attack took place?**

An attack would likely take place without any knowledge that it has occurred. There would be no warning nor is it likely that people would see, smell, taste, or feel anything different when it occurred. If that were to happen, then large numbers of persons with illness would be the first sign of an attack. Physicians and hospitals report infectious illnesses to the health department, which monitors for changing patterns of disease.

If there is evidence of a credible threat or an attack, the plans that have or are being developed would be activated and people in the community would be advised as to what actions they should take.

**How can I prepare my family and myself for a bioterrorism threat?**

There is presently little that individuals can do in advance to protect themselves from a bioterrorist attack. However, there is much that government agencies, health care facilities a, and public health departments are doing to improve our local and state capacity to protect the public following an attack. In each community, your local health department is responsible for helping protect your community against outbreaks of infectious disease, whether that disease occurs in nature or because it is released by a terrorist. Your health department can assist you with questions and concerns you may have about bioterrorism.

Although the Ohio Department of Health does not recommend specific bioterrorism-related precautions for the public, we do recommend that families have a disaster plan in place for any event (e.g., flood, tornado) that includes these emergency supplies:

- Three day supply of water and non-perishable food supplies
- Clothing, blankets, and sleeping bags;
- First aid kit including current prescription medications (e.g. for blood pressure)
- Battery-powered radio and flashlight with extra batteries;
- Sanitation supplies; and
- Special needs items for infants, older adults, or disabled family members (e.g. formula, medications, special equipment)

Should a bioterrorism event occur, it is important that you listen to the instructions of emergency and public health workers. They will need your cooperation to perform their duties as rapidly and successfully as possible.

### **Should I have my own supply of antibiotics?**

There are a number of different germs a bioterrorist might use to carry out an attack. Many antibiotics are effective for a variety of diseases, but there is no antibiotic that is effective against all disease. Thus, no single pill can protect against all types of biological weapon attacks. Keeping a supply of antibiotics on hand poses other problems because the antibiotics have a limited “shelf life” before they lose their strength.

There is currently no justification for taking antibiotics. Also, it should be known that antibiotics can cause side effects. They should only be taken with medical supervision.

In normal circumstances, these antibiotics are not recommended for children and/or pregnant mothers. However, in the event of a bioterrorist attack the benefits of taking such antibiotics may outweigh the risk of side effects.

### **What is the National Pharmaceutical Stockpile (NPS)?**

The NPS is a large reserve of antibiotics, chemical antidotes and other medical supplies set aside for emergencies. The CDC reports that it has the capacity to move these stockpiled materials to affected areas in the U.S. within 12 hours of notification. There are a number of different stockpiles, strategically located around the country. In addition to the medical supplies already set aside, the federal government has made an agreement with drug manufacturers to make large amounts of additional emergency medicine available.

### **Should I buy a gas mask?**

No. A mask would only protect you if you were wearing it at the exact moment a bioterrorist attack occurred. Unfortunately, a release of a biological agent is most likely to be done “covertly”, that is, without anyone knowing it. That means you would not know ahead of time to put on your mask. To wear a mask continuously or “just in case” a bioterrorist attack occurs, is impractical, if not impossible.

To work effectively, masks must be specially fitted to the wearer, and wearers must be trained in their use. This is usually done for the military and for workers in industries and laboratories who face routine exposure to chemicals and germs on the job. Gas masks purchased at an Army surplus store or off the internet carry no guarantees that they will work....More serious is the fact that the masks can be dangerous. There are reports of accidental suffocation when people have worn masks incorrectly, as happened to some Israeli civilians during the Persian Gulf War.

### **Is it safe for me to drink water from the tap?**

Public drinking water supplies are safe. It would be VERY difficult for a bioterrorist to contaminate our drinking water supplies to cause widespread illness. There are two reasons. First of all, huge amounts of water are pumped daily from our reservoirs, most used for industrial and other purposes. Anything deliberately put into the water supply would be greatly diluted. Secondly, water treatment facilities routinely filter the water supply and add chlorine to kill germs.

### **What is smallpox?**

Smallpox is a disease caused by the *Variola* virus. Historically, 1 out of 3 people who contracted the disease died. The disease can spread from person to person. Transmission usually occurs only after the patient develops a fever and rash. Although there is no treatment for the disease, a vaccine against smallpox provides excellent protection and serves to stop the spread of the disease. While many vaccines must be given weeks or months before a person is exposed to infection, smallpox vaccine is different. It protects a person even when given 2 to 3 days after exposure to the disease and may prevent a fatal outcome even when given as late as 4 to 5 days after exposure.

Smallpox was stamped out globally by 1980 and vaccination stopped everywhere in the world. However, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) maintain an emergency supply of smallpox vaccine. Currently there are 12-15 million doses in storage, and a program to produce more vaccine began a year ago.

### **If smallpox is a potential threat to the U.S., why shouldn't we all get vaccinated?**

The vaccine may cause serious side effects. In 1972, the U.S. decided to stop routinely vaccinating its citizens because many people were experiencing side effects, while they had almost no risk of getting smallpox. By 1972, the disease was present only in a few countries of Asia and Africa. Today, health authorities would only recommend vaccination if there was clear evidence that the disease had resurfaced and those in the U.S. were at risk of acquiring infection.

Many people over age 30 have a vaccination scar. Vaccination consists of introducing the virus into the top layers of the skin. Over the following few days, a blister forms at the site of vaccination (usually the upper arm). The arm is sore, and there is fever. Very rarely, some people get a vaccine-related infection of the brain (about 1 case per 300,000 vaccinations); one fourth of these cases are fatal. Other potential negative effects of the vaccine are a severe skin reaction, spread of the vaccine virus (known as *Vaccinia*) to other parts of the body, and spread of the *Vaccinia* virus to other people.

### **If I was vaccinated against smallpox before 1980, am I still protected?**

Probably not. Vaccination has been shown to wear off in most people after 10 years but may last longer if the person has been successfully vaccinated on multiple occasions. If health authorities determine that you have been exposed to smallpox or are at risk of infection, they would recommend that you be re-vaccinated immediately.

### **What is anthrax?**

Anthrax is a disease caused by bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. The form of the disease that health authorities are concerned that a bioterrorist attack might produce is inhalational anthrax. Inhalational anthrax occurs when a person breathes in anthrax spores. As early as a day or two after exposure or as late as seven weeks afterward, the spores begin to grow rapidly and the victim develops fever, has difficulty breathing and feels miserable. Death typically occurs within a few days after these symptoms if the person doesn't receive medical treatment. It is believed that antibiotics can stop the disease if they are taken at the time the anthrax spores begin to grow or very soon thereafter.

In the event of a bioterrorist attack, health authorities would conduct a rapid investigation, determine the place and time of the release, and identify individuals who need antibiotics. The federal government has stockpiled antibiotics for large-scale distribution in the event of a bioterrorist attack.

### **Is anthrax contagious?**

No. Anthrax is not contagious. It does not spread from person to person. Healthy people who come into contact with persons sick with anthrax cannot acquire the disease

### **Are vaccines for Anthrax available and should I get vaccinated?**

The anthrax vaccine is not commercially available in the United States and is not a recommended vaccine for the civilian population.

### **What is the Ohio Health Department doing to protect the public and prepare for Bioterrorism?**

Ohio has been preparing a response to biological and chemical threats for several years. Ohio was one of the first states to receive monies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop planning aimed at protecting the health of the population should an event occur.

The Ohio Department of Health partners with your local health department and other state agencies to assure a rapid response to threats and hazards within communities. This preparation includes:

- Assuring that planning occurs at the local level
- Training physicians, nurses and other health care providers;
- Launching the Ohio disease Reporting System (September 2001) for detection and electronic reporting of disease on a daily basis;
- Lab readiness to detect biological agents as quickly as possible;
- Development of the Health Alert Network (HAN), a system of extensive communications, to keep health care providers informed about events across the state and nation and send out emergency alerts.
- Planning for delivery of CDC's National Pharmaceutical Stockpile (NPS) and working with your local planners to assure readiness of medications prior to NPS arrival.

### **What are Summit County and my community doing to protect the public and prepare for Bioterrorism?**

The City of Akron and surrounding communities in Summit County are working together to develop a Metropolitan Medical Response System to deal with the consequences of a Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) terrorist incident, the outbreak of epidemic disease, or the release of Biological, Nuclear, Incendiary, Chemical and Explosive (BNICE) agents. This plan identifies how the Public Health, Public Safety, and Health Service resources will be coordinated in case of the above-described events.

## **What if my fear about bioterrorism is having a serious impact on my family and work life?**

Given the attacks upon civilians that took place on September 11, it is reasonable for citizens to feel anxious about their personal safety. Should your fear get to the point that it stops you from doing the things you would normally do in a day, it might be helpful to talk with someone. Your health care provider can make a referral if you do not already have someone in mind. In the wake of the attack on New York City, we have learned how helpful it has been to many New Yorkers to speak with a counselor or to go to a mental health center.

If you have further questions, please contact the Summit County Health Department at (330) 923-4891 or 1-877-687-0002. We are open 8:00am – 4:00pm Monday through Friday. After-hours, weekend and holiday callers are welcome to leave a message with either the Environmental Health or Nursing Division.

References: All materials above are quoted from the following sources:

Frequently Asked Questions: Bioterrorism Concerns after September 11 The Center for Civilian Biodefense Studies [www.hopkins-biodefense.org](http://www.hopkins-biodefense.org)

Ohio Department of Health: Frequently Asked Questions of BIOTERRORISM Release 10/4/01 Ohio Department of Health Health Alert Network. [www.odh.state.oh.us](http://www.odh.state.oh.us)

The Dispensing of Antibiotics for Prophylaxis for Potential Biologic Attack Answers to Potential Questions. Dr. M Erme, Akron Health Department [www.ci.akron.oh.us](http://www.ci.akron.oh.us)

Additional info available at:

Centers for Disease Control [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)