

# Chief Health Officer Alert

## Anthrax: injecting heroin users

Tuesday, 19 January 2010

This alert is to notify General Practitioners, and Emergency Department staff of anthrax infections occurring in injecting heroin users in Scotland and Germany.

### Overview

Anthrax has occurred in 14 injecting heroin users in Scotland and one in Germany since early December 2009. Eight individuals have died.

Contaminated heroin or cutting agent is suspected as the cause.

If heroin available in Australia has originated from the same source, Australian injecting heroin users may also be at risk of anthrax infections.

### Possible clinical findings

Please be alert for the possibility of anthrax cases in any injecting drug user who presents with:

- Severe soft tissue infection, including **necrotising fasciitis** or **cellulitis/abscess**. Tissue oedema may be very severe.
- Severe sepsis, even without signs of localised infection.
- Meningitis, especially haemorrhagic meningitis.
- Typical features of **cutaneous anthrax** may also be seen, with an initial papule developing into a painless, necrotic ulcer with haemorrhagic margins and a black eschar with marked oedema of the affected site or limb. Typical cutaneous anthrax has NOT been seen in any of the recent cases amongst injecting heroin users in Scotland or Germany.

### Recommendations

- **Notify suspected anthrax cases immediately** to the Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Unit on 1300 651 160.
- **Take initial diagnostic tests:**
  - Blood cultures
  - Tissues and material from lesion/abscess for culture. Tissue is preferred to swabs.
- **Refer immediately to hospital** for
  - Infectious Diseases physician consultation and management.
  - Timely surgical debridement to drain any collection and remove devitalised tissue.
  - Commencement of empiric antibiotics to cover anthrax and more common pathogens as per Infectious Diseases physician advice.

Anthrax does not spread person-to-person, however contact precautions are recommended for wound care.

### References:

1. UK Health Protection Agency: Clinical evaluation & management of injecting drug users with possible anthrax  
<http://www.hpa.org.uk/web/HPAwebFile/HPAwebC/1259152399460>
2. Eurosurveillance, Volume 15, Issue 2, 14 January 2010 : An outbreak of infection with bacillus anthracis in injecting drug users in Scotland; C N Ramsay, A Stirling, J Smith, G Hawkins, T Brooks, J Hood, G Penrice, L M Browning, S Ahmed.  
<http://www.eurosurveillance.org/ViewArticle.aspx?ArticleId=19465>

Yours sincerely



Dr John Carnie  
Chief Health Officer