

For Health Professionals

Health Alerts

Health Alert #5 - Terrorist Activity Response - 09/2001

Due to last week's tragic events in New York City and Washington, D.C., the CDC is on heightened alert status to monitor for any possible unusual disease patterns associated with chemical or biological terrorism. Following CDC recommendations, the Erie County Department of Health has initiated heightened epidemiologic surveillance for terrorist activity. Please be on the alert for any unusual disease pattern or occurrence, or increased numbers of illness that may be associated with a chemical or biological threat (e.g., respiratory disease with fever, gastrointestinal illness, neurological syndromes, fever with rash).

Healthcare providers in Erie County should be alert to the illness patterns and diagnostic clues that might signal an unusual infectious disease outbreak due to the intentional release of a biological agent. Vigilance for unusual disease clusters and timely reporting to the health department are critical to the early detection of a covert bioterrorist event and rapid implementation of public health interventions.

Look for the following clinical and epidemiological clues that are suggestive of a possible bioterrorist event:

- Suspected or confirmed communicable diseases that are not endemic in NYC (e.g., anthrax, plague, tularemia, smallpox, or viral hemorrhagic fever)
- Any unusual age distributions or clustering for a rare or common disease
- Any sudden increase of illness in previously healthy individuals
- Any sudden increase in the following non-specific syndromes:
 - Respiratory illness with fever
 - Gastrointestinal illness
 - Encephalitis or meningitis
 - Neuromuscular illness (e.g., botulism)
 - Fever with rash
 - Bleeding disorders
- Simultaneous disease outbreaks in human and animal populations
- Any unusual temporal and/or geographic clustering of illness (e.g., persons who attended the same public event or religious gathering)

Some infections caused by biological agents present with distinctive signs that can provide valuable diagnostic clues. In previously healthy persons presenting with a febrile illness, the following signs and symptoms are highly suggestive of infection with certain biological agents:

Diagnostic Sign	Disease
Widened mediastinum	Inhalational anthrax

Gram negative pneumonia with hemoptysis

Pneumonic
plague

Vesicular/pustular rash starting on face and hands, with all lesions at the same stage of development

Smallpox

Most of the potential pathogens that could be used as a biologic weapon (e.g., anthrax, plague, and smallpox) would present initially as a non-specific influenza-like illness. Therefore, an unusual pattern of respiratory or influenza-like illness (e.g., occurring out of season or large numbers of previously healthy patients presenting simultaneously) should prompt clinicians to alert the ECDOH. These disease patterns might represent an early start to the influenza season, the introduction of a new pandemic strain, or could be the initial warning of a bioterrorist event.

Should you suspect any such activity, please contact the office of Disease Control immediately.

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For additional information: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/Agent/Agentlist.asp>