

Facts:

from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment



Smallpox FAQs for emergency responders

What should I know about smallpox?

First, there currently are NO cases of smallpox anywhere in the world. The last case of smallpox in the United States was in 1949, and the last case in the world was in Somalia in 1977. Small amounts of smallpox virus are stored for research purposes.

What is smallpox?

Smallpox is a highly contagious virus. Though it is a “pox” disease involving fever and rash, smallpox is far more serious than chickenpox, with much more severe symptoms.

The symptoms of smallpox begin with a high fever, head and body aches, and sometimes vomiting. A rash follows that turns into raised bumps and pus-filled blisters, which crust, scab, and fall off after about three weeks, leaving a pitted scar. If you get vaccinated within three days of coming into contact with a smallpox patient, the vaccine almost always can prevent serious illness.

Is smallpox fatal?

With the advances in medicine since smallpox was eliminated, scientists speculate that fewer people would die than in the past. In some areas of the world that did not have adequate medical care, about 30 percent of smallpox patients died. However, since there are increasing numbers of persons with illnesses that suppress the body's immune system, including

AIDS and cancer, it is difficult to know what the impact could be.

How is the United States dealing with the threat of a bioterrorist attack using smallpox?

Even before the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001, the U.S. government began taking precautions so that the country would be ready to deal with a bioterrorist attack using smallpox as a weapon. There now is a nationwide smallpox response plan to quickly vaccinate people and contain a smallpox outbreak. U.S. officials have stockpiled enough smallpox vaccine to vaccinate everyone in the United States in the event of an emergency.

What should I know about the smallpox vaccine?

The smallpox vaccine is the only way to prevent smallpox for people who are at risk of exposure. It is made from a virus called vaccinia. Vaccinia is related to smallpox but it does not cause smallpox. The vaccination is given using a two-pronged needle, dipped in the vaccine, to prick the skin several times. This vaccine was used to successfully wipe out naturally occurring smallpox from the world by teams who identified those who had contact with smallpox patients, isolated them, and inoculated them with vaccine within three to seven days.

Can I get the vaccination to protect my family and me?

Colorado has a number of public health and healthcare workers who have been immunized with the live vaccinia vaccine. This will ensure that, in the event of an attack, the people who will be responsible for caring for the ill are immunized themselves.

The vaccination does carry some risk. There is a window of time after exposure in which vaccination can be effective. Even when given within three to seven days of exposure, the vaccination still can prevent many of the severe symptoms.

If there is an attack, there is enough smallpox vaccine to vaccinate every man, woman, and child in the nation.

Can I get sick from the vaccine?

The vaccine is a live virus, though it is not smallpox. However, there are some instances in which people have gotten sick from the vaccine, or from coming in contact with people who recently had been vaccinated.

How is smallpox spread?

Smallpox is spread by direct face-to-face contact with an infected person, through direct contact with their body fluids, or sometimes through contact with contaminated bedding or clothing.

Can the vaccine cause smallpox?

No. The virus that you can get from the vaccine is called vaccinia. Vaccinia virus is spread by touching a vaccination site before it has healed or by touching bandages or clothing that have become contaminated with live virus from the vaccination site.

Is there a risk in getting the vaccination?

There are reports of some people experiencing serious or life-threatening reactions to smallpox vaccine, but those instances are very few. There are medications that can help some of those who have serious reactions to the vaccine, and there is a screening program to help determine which people should not get the vaccine because of a higher likelihood of experiencing problems from vaccination.

If I'm willing to accept the risks, why can't I get vaccinated?

Because it is not just you who is potentially at risk for serious effects from smallpox vaccination. For three weeks

after you get the vaccination, you could be contagious to those around you. For some people, the result could be a life-threatening reaction. So, if there is not an outbreak of smallpox, the risks to the general public from the vaccine are greater than the protection of the vaccination.

What if we are attacked?

If there is an attack using smallpox as a weapon, the benefits of the vaccine for those who may have been exposed to smallpox would far outweigh the risks of vaccination in almost all cases. There is a state plan for the rapid delivery of vaccine if it becomes necessary. As recommended by experts worldwide, the Colorado plan calls for immediate vaccination of those who are known to be exposed and their close contacts.

How will emergency responders be vaccinated?

The Colorado plan for vaccination now details the response to an outbreak once the first cases of smallpox have been identified. If there is a smallpox attack, or even one case of smallpox anywhere in the world, and the benefits of vaccination outweigh the risks of exposure, emergency responders

will be a priority for vaccination.

In light of the critical role that emergency responders would play, planning for quick vaccination is essential. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, local public health agencies, and emergency response groups are developing vaccinator training for key people among emergency responder staff. These vaccinators would be ready to immunize emergency responders immediately.

What will emergency responders be asked to do if there is a smallpox outbreak?

To prepare for an outbreak, emergency responders will have the opportunity to learn more about identifying smallpox, containing the potential risk to others, and how to use personal protective equipment that is effective with infectious diseases such as smallpox.

If there is a smallpox outbreak, emergency responders may be the first to identify the need to isolate a patient. Information about isolation facilities will be available to all response agencies.

If vaccinations are to be administered to the public, emergency responders may be called upon to assist with security needs and medical back-up at vaccination clinics.

Reliable sources of information

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

1-888-246-2675 (English)

1-888-246-2857 (Español)

1-866-874-2646 (TTY)

M-F 8 a.m. – 11 p.m.; S-S 10 a.m. – 8 p.m.

Colorado HELP hotline

www.cohelp.us

1-877-462-2911 (toll-free)

M-F 7 a.m. – 11 p.m.; S-S 9:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.



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of Public Health
and Environment

August 2004