



Diseases Fact Sheet - Bioterrorism

South Dakota Department of Health

Office of Disease Prevention Services - 605-773-3737 -(1-800-592-1861 in South Dakota only)

This material is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical care. We are not able to answer personal medical questions. Please see your health care provider concerning appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is it?

Bioterrorism is a criminal act that involves the intentional or threatened uses of viruses, bacteria, chemicals, etc. to produce death or disease.

How will bioterrorism be detected?

An announced event (terrorist group announces their intent or deed) will be evaluated at the time by primary health care providers, public health and law enforcement. An unannounced event will be detected by private health care providers, infection control and/or public health surveillance as an unusual disease or death occurrence, once the disease starts to manifest itself in the victims. Prompt recognition and reporting is important to prevent spread and control future cases. Call [1-800-592-1861](tel:1-800-592-1861) or [1-605-773-3536](tel:1-605-773-3536) immediately to report unusual illness or unexplained death.

How would biological agents be spread?

Biological weapons could be spread through contamination of food or water or by inhalation of fine-particle aerosols. Either way would be effective, however aerosols would be a more effective way to disseminate a large quantity of agent capable of causing mass casualties in an area.

- Viral hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola, Marburg, and Lassa fever
- Variola — the virus that causes smallpox, an infection eradicated from the globe
- *Francisella tularensis* — the causative agent of [tularemia](#)
- *Yersinia pestis* — the causative agent of [plague](#)
- *Clostridium botulinum* — the causative agent of [botulism](#)
- *Brucella* species — the causative agent of [brucellosis](#)
- *Bacillus anthracis* — the causative agent of [anthrax](#)

What are the agents of most concern?

Many biological agents could be used to make weapons, however most experts agree that only



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a limited number of well-known biological agents would cause widespread illness and death. Those agents most likely to be used as weapons are:

Domestically, religious groups, anti-government groups, groups who want to make a statement about perceived wrongs or to demonstrate independence or individuals who are emotionally disturbed are those who are most likely to commit acts of bioterrorism.

Where is the threat?

Internationally, rogue nations and political terrorists who have the capability and the will to use bioweapons are the most likely groups expected to commit bioterrorism.

What is the risk?

There is a low risk of a bioterrorism attack, moderate risk for bioterrorism threats, but there would be severe consequences if an event did occur.

Bioterrorism involves the intentional or threatened uses of viruses, bacteria, fungi, toxins from living organisms, or chemicals, to produce death or disease in humans, animals or plants. Bioterrorism is always a criminal act.