

How do flu and anthrax infection symptoms differ?

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ATLANTA, Oct 31, 2001 (United Press International via COMTEX) -- The "flu-like symptoms" associated with inhalation anthrax do not include a runny nose, according to infectious disease experts Wednesday, who suggested that the distinction could help people tell whether they were suffering from the potentially deadly disease or not.

Dr. Keiji Fukuda, a medical epidemiologist and flu expert at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told a news teleconference Wednesday the 10 confirmed cases of inhalation anthrax "have not presented with rhinitis or a runny nose, which is a very common symptom of the common cold. So if you have a runny nose, you are probably developing something like a cold."

Dr. Martin Blaser, chief of the department of medicine at New York University School of Medicine, told United Press International that classic flu "frequently presents with no respiratory symptoms. Instead, people will complain of headache, fever, muscle aches, and a dry cough."

Unfortunately, said Blaser, those symptoms are virtually identical to the symptoms of inhalation anthrax, which so far has been associated with four deaths. Blaser said that with just 10 cases so far, medical experts have very little hard evidence on which to make diagnoses. But some crucial differences between flu symptoms and anthrax are emerging.

For example, flu or influenza "runs its course in a few days. So, on the first day if the patient has fever, aches or dry cough it is overwhelmingly likely that the cause is flu," said Blaser. On the second day "it is still very likely to be flu, but the likelihood is a little less overwhelming." By day three -- and especially if symptoms have progressed -- flu is less likely.

The problem for both patients and physicians is that there is no clear demarcation point at which to know that "it is for sure anthrax and not flu," said Blaser.

He said, therefore, that both physicians and hospital emergency rooms could expect to see more patients with flu symptoms who want to know if they have flu or anthrax. While he said that he understands the patients' need for information, he said most doctors would not be able to supply ready answers.

Patients are used to physicians telling them to come back in a week or two for follow-up care, but "now we are going to be telling them to come back tomorrow, and the next day," he said.

Part of Blaser's job is to oversee the departments of medicine at NYU Medical Center and at Bellevue Hospital "so we are at the center of this and we are not overwhelmed right now, but business is brisk," he said.

Both Fukuda and Blaser emphasized the flu is much more common than anthrax and is also more deadly. Blaser said as many as 100 million upper respiratory cases are diagnosed each year in the United States and Fukuda said the CDC estimates that flu kills about 20,000 Americans each year. "If every high risk patient gets a flu shot, we will save many more people than anthrax will kill," said Blaser.

"To try to put this in perspective: four people have died from inhalation anthrax in the past month," said Blaser. "By my calculation during the same period eight people died because they were struck by lightning."