



SPIEZ LABORATORY

CH-3700 Spiez

Tel +41 (0)33 228 14 00

Fax +41 (0)33 228 14 02

laborspiez@gr.admin.ch

www.vbs.admin.ch/lis

GRUPPE RÜSTUNG
GROUPEMENT DE L'ARMEMENT
AGGRUPPAMENTO DELL'ARMAMENTO
DEFENCE PROCUREMENT AGENCY



Frequently Asked Questions

1. *What is Switzerland doing to prevent a B-incident or recognise it early? Are there concrete measures in place since the September 11th attacks in the US?*

After the events of September 11th in the US, the Swiss Federal Government established a B- commission, consisting of specialists from the federal government, cantons, as well as external experts. This commission is devoted to tackling the problem of biological weapons.

2. *Is Switzerland a target for a B-attack?*

The possibility of an act of bioterrorism is taken very seriously in Switzerland. However, specialists consider the probability of such an attack to be extremely low. With the creation of an interdepartmental B-commission, a committee was formed to analyse this theme in depth. The danger of a B-terror attack cannot be completely excluded; however, technical know-how and the necessary financial means are required to produce a biological weapon. Furthermore, the actual use of a biological weapon is considered to be very difficult.

3. *Who is responsible for deployment on location?*

The cantonal police troops and the fire department are the first in line. They stay in contact with the responsible cantonal authorities. At SPIEZ LABORATORY, specially trained task forces can support the task forces on location, such as by taking samples.

4. *What protection from biological weapons is provided by the filters in the protective masks and shelters?*

The filters in the army protective masks, as well as those filters used in civil protection facilities, offer protection from biological weapons. Civil filters offer protection only if equipped with the corresponding suitable aerosol filter ([more here](#)). (→ *Options for NBC-Protection in the Milieu of Terrorism*).

5. *Is it advisable for a private person to buy a protective mask?*

Specialists consider the probability of B/C-terrorism in Switzerland to be very low. The protective mask must be worn for the entire day to be used prophylactically. In the event of a major incident, the foreseen concept is the occupation of shelters. There, the installed filters offer good protection against biological and chemical agents. For this reason, we advise against the purchase of a protective mask.

6. What should be done with suspicious letters and packages?

[The necessary information can be found here.](#) (→ Information for the Public)

7. What forms of anthrax are there?

There are three forms of anthrax: inhalation anthrax (airborne), gastrointestinal anthrax (foodborne) and cutaneous anthrax (pathogen penetrates through lesions in the skin). The pathogen occurs naturally in soil.

Anthrax is considered to be an extremely potent biological weapon. The intentional release of anthrax in the form of an aerosol results in the medical syndrome of inhalation anthrax.

8. Is anthrax contagious?

Anthrax cannot be transmitted from person-to-person.

9. Is there a vaccine against anthrax and if so, is it available in Switzerland?

In the US, there is a vaccine against anthrax, which is only used for military purposes. Due to its side effects, its use is highly disputed. During the Gulf War, American soldiers were immunised with this vaccine. Specialists generally advise against immunisation of the population. The vaccine is not authorised in Europe.

10. How do I recognise the symptoms of anthrax?

After inhalation of anthrax, flu-like symptoms with fever, cough, and chest pain appear within 1-5 days. Severe pneumonia then develops, with shortness of breath and blue discoloration of the skin. Death occurs about 3 days following the beginning of the acute phase. Without treatment, chances of recovery are very slim.

11. Can anthrax be treated, and if so, is there enough medication in Switzerland?

Various antibiotics can be used for the treatment of anthrax: penicillin, ciprofloxacin, tetracycline, erythromycin. Switzerland has sufficient supplies of antibiotics that can be used in an emergency. With early treatment, the chances of recovery are very good.

12. What is the situation concerning resistance to antibiotics?

We consider the possibility of naturally-occurring resistance to antibiotics to be rather small. In nature, the germ does not come into contact with or hardly comes into contact with antibiotics, allowing the possible development of resistance. Various antibiotics are available in Switzerland. Antibiotic-resistant bacteria can be produced in the laboratory; however their use as a biological weapon requires technical and specialised know-how.

13. When did the last incidence of anthrax occur in Switzerland?

The last case of anthrax occurred in Switzerland in 1991. It was a case of cutaneous anthrax. The last large anthrax epidemic occurred between 1978-81, when 25 workers at a textile factory were infected. Twenty-four had cutaneous anthrax and one person suffered inhalation anthrax. All survived the infection.

14. Are there laboratories in Switzerland that work with anthrax?

In Switzerland, there are only diagnostic laboratories where reference strains are kept for diagnostic purposes. No research on anthrax is done in Switzerland. Laboratories that work with anthrax must meet high safety precautions. For instance, the air must be filtered, the

waste water must be decontaminated, and access must be strictly regulated.

15. *Who can diagnose anthrax?*

SPIEZ LABORATORY is not in the position to diagnose anthrax. However, in all larger cities in Switzerland, there are laboratories with the capability to test for anthrax. In the event of the suspicion of anthrax, notify the police, who will arrange the necessary analyses.

16. *I am planning a trip to the US. Should I take medication with me to protect myself from anthrax?*

The public health system in the US is intact and the danger of an anthrax infection is very low. Bringing antibiotics is, therefore, unnecessary.

17. *Is there sufficient smallpox vaccine in Switzerland and is vaccination now advisable?*

Presently, there are about 6 million doses of smallpox vaccine available in Switzerland. The risk of a pox infection is considered by experts to be very low. The vaccination can also be used therapeutically, if administered within 24 hours after contact. Vaccination is not necessary at this time.