

The Branch – Hillsdale – St. Joseph Community Health Agency

Ricin – what you need to know

What is Ricin? - Ricin is a deadly poison made from beans of the castor plant. It is fairly easily removed from the bean pulp remaining after castor oil is extracted. It can then be made into a powder or aerosol. Ricin is difficult to detect in the environment and can persist in the soil up to 3 days.

Has a Ricin poisoning ever occurred? - Until the events in Washington D.C this month, there has been very little human experience with Ricin. Ricin poisoning has occurred in acts of terrorism and an assassination in 1978. It was used as a weapon in World War II and was found in the caves of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. For Ricin to be found or used in mid-Michigan would be highly unlikely and would most assuredly be deliberate.

How likely is it to be used as a terrorist agent? Unlikely, especially attempting to affect a large number of people. It is difficult to process into a size that would be effective in harming large numbers of people. Anthrax would, and has been, more of a weapon of choice for terrorists.

What are the symptoms of Ricin poisoning? - Depending on the amount and type of exposure (breathing, eating) symptoms are as follows:

Breathing – would show symptoms such as cough, weakness, fever, nausea, muscle aches, difficulty in breathing

Eating – would show symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever, stomach pain.

Can I be infected from someone else?- No. Ricin is a poison and is not transmitted from person to person.

Is there a treatment? – No, there is no antidote. Hospitalization would be critical to help alleviate the effects of the poisoning, such as difficulty in breathing, reduced blood pressure, and to attempt to flush the poison from the stomach. Death from Ricin poisoning usually occurs within 36-72 hours from the time of exposure, depending on the amount. If the patient survives the first 3 to 5 days, they usually do not die.

What do I do if I think I have been exposed to Ricin? – If you are outdoors, move immediately away from the area of exposure. If you are indoors, get outside as soon as possible to get to fresh air. The amount of exposure relates directly to your possibility of survival.

Where can I find out more about Ricin? – Go to our web site at www.bhsj.org, click on the Emergency Preparedness button and follow the link for **Disease Information**. You can also go to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) web site at www.bt.cdc.gov/agent/ricin/index.asp to read more.

Please call one of our offices if you have questions or concerns regarding this information.

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