

Overcoming anthrax bacterium's natural defenses could hold key to new treatments

May 18 2010

Army scientists have discovered a way to "trick" the bacterium that causes anthrax into shedding its protective covering, making it easier for the body's immune system to mount a defense. The study, which appears in this month's issue of the journal *Microbiology*, could lead to new approaches for treating anthrax infection.

[Bacillus anthracis](#), the causative agent of anthrax, is particularly lethal because of its protective coating, or capsule, which enables the pathogen to escape destruction by the host's immune system. A key [bacterial enzyme](#) called capsule depolymerase, or CapD, anchors the capsule to the cell surface. CapD also cuts and releases part of the capsule into small fragments that are thought to interfere with specific parts of the immune system, offering further protection to the bacterium. The rest of the capsule remains intact.

Finding a way to cause *B. anthracis* to unmask itself, using the bacterium's own machinery, would be a novel approach to defeating the pathogen. So scientists at the U.S. Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) induced *B. anthracis* to make higher-than-normal amounts of CapD, resulting in release of the capsule fragments. This left very little capsule attached to the [bacterial cells](#). As a result, the unprotected bacteria were left vulnerable to immediate detection and destruction by the cells of the immune system.

"By engineering *B. anthracis* to over-produce CapD, we are effectively turning the bacterium's own weapon on itself," explained Dr. Arthur

Friedlander, one of the study's principal investigators. He believes the USAMRIID group's findings could have significant clinical impact.

"Many [pathogenic bacteria](#), including *B. anthracis*, produce a capsule surrounding them that prevents the infected host from killing them, improving their chances of causing disease," he explained.

"Understanding the mechanisms of virulence used by the anthrax bacterium is vital to developing medical countermeasures against it."

Anthrax most commonly occurs in wild and domestic mammals, although it has the potential to be used as a biological threat agent. Symptoms vary depending on the route of exposure; however, mild fever, fatigue and muscle aches usually begin within 4-6 days of exposure. As the bacteria multiply in the lymph nodes, toxemia progresses and the potential for widespread tissue dissemination, destruction and organ failure increases. Severe breathing difficulty, meningitis and shock can follow. Up to 90 percent of untreated cases of inhalational anthrax result in death.

"This study provides significant insight into the pathogenesis of anthrax infection, tracing the connection between *B. anthracis* gene expression to its effect on host response," said Colonel John P. Skvorak, commander of USAMRIID.

Provided by US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases

Citation: Overcoming anthrax bacterium's natural defenses could hold key to new treatments (2010, May 18) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-05-anthrax-bacterium-natural-defenses-key.html>

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