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Military To Get Anthrax Inoculation

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SUSANNE M. SCHAFER
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Defense Secretary William Cohen ordered all 1.5 million men and women in uniform Monday to be inoculated against **anthrax**, citing a growing worldwide threat from the deadliest form of germ warfare.

"This is a force protection issue," Cohen said in a statement. "We owe it to our people to move ahead with this immunization plan."

Terrorist bombings aimed at U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia and fears that enemies such as **Iraq** and North Korea might use biological weapons prompted the Pentagon initiative, officials said. The move comes amid the confrontation with **Iraq's Saddam** Hussein and the United Nations' efforts to uncover his weapons of mass destruction.

More than one-quarter of U.S. forces who served in the Persian Gulf War were inoculated against **anthrax**, an infectious disease that usually afflicts only animals, especially cattle and sheep.

Anthrax spores can be produced in a dry form suitable for weapons in an artillery shell that could explode and spray the poison over a wide area, for example and can be fatal even in microscopic amounts, Pentagon officials said.

Iraq, Russia and as many as 10 other countries are believed to have the capability to use **anthrax** in weapons. The Pentagon considers it the easiest biological weapon to make and use, and the most lethal as well.

The inoculations involve six shots over an 18-month period. Over the next six years, about 2.4 million people will receive the shots at a cost of about \$130 million, a Pentagon statement said. An annual booster is also required.

Inoculation is considered the best protection. Pentagon officials insisted the vaccine is safe and effective; it has been licensed by the Food and Drug Administration since the 1970s, and is used mainly by those who come into contact with cattle and sheep.

The first shots will be given next summer to about 100,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines deployed to "high threat" areas in the Persian Gulf region and around the Korean peninsula, officials said.

"Our goal is to vaccinate everybody in the force so they will be ready to deploy anywhere, anytime," Deputy Defense Secretary John Hamre said in the statement.

Some members of the reserves and the military's civilian work force will also be vaccinated if they are expected to be sent to a high-threat area.

At the Pentagon briefing, an official said extra precautions are being taken in the case of the **anthrax** vaccine. For example, pregnant women will not be given the drug until after they have given birth and returned to duty.

Inoculations against a variety of diseases are normal for military personnel. They can range from measles to smallpox to typhoid to polio or yellow fever, depending upon the need.

Just like any vaccine, the **anthrax** vaccine, manufactured by the Michigan Department of Public Health, can cause mild reactions at the injection site, said Bonnie Lee, a senior policy analyst at FDA who deals with vaccinations. Some 4 percent of people have moderate inflammation at the injection site, and a few also have bruising of the forearm, she said.

Less than 0.5 percent of patients have any systemic reaction, such as malaise or chills. Those who do

should not receive subsequent shots, Lee said.

Military lab workers and soldiers and Marines involved in chemical and biological warfare units and special operations forces already are given the vaccine, Pentagon officials said.

The decision to administer the shots to all U.S. military personnel was made informally last year but was delayed over concerns about whether a proper procedure could be set up to monitor those who were inoculated.

The Pentagon came under severe criticism for having poor records involving the health care of the veterans from the Persian Gulf War, some of whom years later had concerns about their health and the inoculations they'd received.

About 150,000 of the more than 500,000 U.S. troops in the Gulf War in 1990 and 1991 were given **anthrax** vaccinations.

No link has been established with Gulf War illnesses.

SUSANNE M. SCHAFER

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