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Anthrax Case Linked to Drumming Circle, New Hampshire Officials Say

By [ABBY GOODNOUGH](#)

BOSTON — A New Hampshire woman who is critically ill with gastrointestinal anthrax most likely swallowed spores while participating in a community drumming circle, state health officials said Tuesday.

The woman was among some 60 people who attended the drumming session on Dec. 4 at the United Campus Ministry near the [University of New Hampshire](#) in Durham, said Dr. Elizabeth A. Talbot, an adviser to the state's Division of Public Health Services.

Officials at the federal [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) said it was one of the nation's only reported cases of gastrointestinal anthrax, an extremely rare form of the disease that typically occurs in people who eat infected meat.

Investigators found traces of anthrax on two African drums and an electrical outlet in the room where the event took

place, Dr. Talbot said, and are theorizing that the woman swallowed spores that were aerosolized by the drumming. The state has not identified the woman because of privacy concerns.

Dr. Talbot said the anthrax detected on the drums was a naturally occurring strain that frequently appears in soil. Animals that ingest contaminated soil can pass the disease to people who handle their hides. Most of the drums at the session were made with animal hides, she said.

Although it is unlikely that others who attended the drumming session will contract the disease, Dr. Talbot said, the state is offering antibiotics and vaccines to all of them as a precautionary measure. It is also providing the treatment to about 20 students who live at the United Campus Ministry building, which is not part of the university but invites students to its events.

“This is an unusual and highly complex investigation,” Dr. Talbot said, adding that the state was still awaiting results on other drums that had been tested.

The ministry advertised the Dec. 4 event on its Web site as a drum circle and pasta supper. Julie Corey, a drumming teacher who led the session, said the victim had danced that night instead of drumming. “She was the first to get up and dance,” Ms. Corey recalled, adding that she thought the woman was a graduate student at another college. “She’s a vital young woman, from what I’ve seen of her — a strong-

spirited person.”

Gastrointestinal anthrax is the rarest of three forms of the disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The others are cutaneous anthrax, acquired through cuts and scrapes on the skin, and inhalation anthrax, acquired by breathing in spores. Up to 60 percent of gastrointestinal anthrax cases are fatal, according to the C.D.C.

In 2007, two people in Connecticut were treated for cutaneous anthrax traced to animal hides used to make African drums. And in 2006, a drum maker in New York contracted inhalation anthrax. All three survived.

Kris Neilsen, a spokeswoman for the State Department of Health and Human Services, said that after consulting with the [F.B.I.](#) the state had concluded the anthrax strain was naturally occurring and unrelated to terrorism.

Leonard A. Cole, an expert on biological weapons at [Rutgers University](#), said additional cases from the drum circle were unlikely because people would usually have to ingest thousands of spores to be infected.

“Maybe this woman was unusually susceptible,” he said. “There’s a fair chance a lot of the others did have some contact with spores but did not become infected.”

Ms. Corey, for one, said she was reluctant to take the

antibiotics. “I’m not in a panic state about it,” she said. “I’ve been exposed to drum hides for 15 years, so what is really the likelihood that it’s a concern for me?”

She also worried aloud that the incident would scare people out of participating in drum circles.

“We don’t need to take something that is so positive and healing and uplifting and all of the sudden get it linked to a horrific disease,” she said. “I guess what I’ll have to do from now on is say, ‘Don’t worry, I’m bringing my synthetic drums.’ ”