

YOUR MAIL & THE THREAT OF BIOLOGICAL MATERIALS

Due to the recent mail threat events in the USA, many people have questions about how mailrooms and offices should handle mail that may contain a written threat of chemical or biological materials inside, or mail that may contain some form of powder. Following are common sense steps to take in workplaces. They have been developed jointly by health professionals, the FBI, and the California Office of Emergency Services.

The risk of contracting any disease from an envelope is extremely low. General awareness of one's surroundings and suspicious mail is appropriate.

GENERAL PRECAUTIONS (for those who handle large volumes of mail)

Wash your hands with warm soap and water before and after handling the mail.

Do not eat, drink or smoke around the mail.

If you have open cuts or skin lesions on your hands, disposable latex gloves may be appropriate.

Surgical masks, eye protection or gowns are NOT necessary or recommended.

TYPICAL CHARACTERISTICS WHICH CONSTITUTE A SUSPICIOUS LETTER OR PARCEL

Powdery substance on the outside.

Are unexpected or from someone unfamiliar to you.

Have excessive postage, handwritten or poorly typed address, incorrect titles or titles with no name, or misspellings of common words.

Are addressed to someone no longer with your organization or otherwise outdated.

Have no return address, or have one that can't be verified as legitimate.

Are of unusual weight, given their size, or are lopsided or oddly shaped.

Have an unusual amount of tape.

Are marked with restrictive endorsements, such as "Personal" or "Confidential".

Have strange odors or stains.

IF A SUSPICIOUS PACKAGE OR LETTER IS RECEIVED

Do not handle, shake or empty the contents.

Isolate the specific area so no one can disturb the item, DO NOT try to clean up any kind of powder, COVER the envelope or package with anything (e.g., clothing, paper, trash can, etc.). Instruct all persons who have touched the mail piece to wash their hands with warm water and soap for one minute.

List all persons who have touched the letter and /or envelope. Include contact information and have this information available for the authorities.

Have someone call 911 and tell them what you received. DO NOT move the envelope or package, wait for emergency responders to arrive. Indicate whether the envelope contains any visible powder or if powder was released. When emergency responders arrive, they will provide further instructions.

DO NOT PANIC! Anthrax organisms can cause infection in the skin, gastrointestinal system, or the lungs. To do so, the organism must be rubbed into abraded skin, swallowed, or inhaled as a fine, aerosolized mist. Disease can be prevented after exposure to the anthrax spores by early treatment with the appropriate antibiotics. Anthrax is not spread from one person to another person.

For anthrax to be effective as a covert agent, it must be aerosolized into very small particles. This is difficult to do, and requires a great deal of technical skill and specialized equipment. If these small particles are inhaled, life-threatening lung infection can occur, but prompt recognition and treatment are effective.