

GUIDELINES FOR HEALTH PROFESSIONALS DEALING WITH SUSPECTED PACKAGES AND MATERIALS

This document describes the actions that should be taken following the receipt of a suspicious package/letter or the identification of suspect material. This guidance provides a proportionate and practical response to this situation.

This document advises on:

- A. General handling of mail and identification of suspect mail**
- B. What to do if you discover suspect mail**
- C. Identification of suspect material and what to do**
- D. What to do if anyone believes they have been exposed to chemical/ biological material**
- E. Risk assessment**
- F. Public Health and Medical management**

This document does not cover action to be taken in the event of a deliberate release of agents - details of the diagnosis and clinical, laboratory and public health management of various biological and chemical agents can be found in the Deliberate Release section of the HPA Infections pages at http://www.hpa.org.uk/infections/topics_az/deliberate_release/menu.htm

RESPONDING TO SUSPECT PACKAGES AND MATERIALS – ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

A. GENERAL HANDLING OF MAIL AND IDENTIFICATION OF SUSPECT MAIL

A1. General advice on mail

Every business and organisation should assess and review their protocols for handling mail. Good sense and care should be used in inspecting and opening mail or packages.

**IF YOU ARE IN ANY DOUBT ABOUT A PACKAGE
DO NOT TOUCH IT, MOVE IT OR OPEN IT
AND CALL THE POLICE 999**

Official UK Government guidance about opening mail delivered by post or courier is as follows:

- Look out for suspicious envelopes or packages (see below A2 for some triggers of suspicion)
- Open all mail with a letter opener or other method that is least likely to disturb contents
- Open letters and packages with a minimum amount of movement
- Do not blow into envelopes or shake or pour out the contents
- Keep hands away from nose and mouth while opening mail
- Wash hands after handling mail

In addition, each organisation should assess whether it is at heightened risk of receiving mail containing a biological or chemical agent. Based on this assessment, organisations may wish to consider additional precautions such as wearing gloves and restricting the opening of mail to a limited number of trained individuals and/ or designated areas.

A2. What types of letters and packages may be suspect

- Any envelopes or packages with suspicious or threatening messages written on it
- Letters with oily stains
- Envelopes that are lopsided, rigid, bulky, discoloured, have an obvious strange odour or feel like they contain powder
- Unexpected envelopes from foreign countries
- No postage stamp, no franking, no cancelling of the postage stamp
- Improper spelling of common names, places or titles
- Hand written envelopes/packages from an unknown source particularly if addressed to an individual and marked personal or addressee only

RESPONDING TO SUSPECT PACKAGES AND MATERIALS – ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

B. WHAT TO DO IF YOU DISCOVER SUSPECT MAIL

B1. Action in the event of finding unopened suspicious mail

- **DO NOT OPEN THE ENVELOPE OR PACKAGE**
- NOTIFY your manager who will advise on further management - if he/she confirms the risk **CALL THE POLICE ON 999 IMMEDIATELY**
- Do NOT take the letter/ package to police
- Do NOT take the letter/ package to any health service (including A&E Departments or GP)

B2. Action in the event of opening a package/envelope which contains suspicious material, or finding an already opened package

- **Do not touch the package further or move it to another location**
- **CALL THE POLICE ON 999 IMMEDIATELY**
- Shut windows and doors in the room and leave the room, but keep yourself separate from others and available for medical examination
- Switch off any room air conditioning system
- If there has been a suspected biological contamination, ensure that personnel outside the room are evacuated as soon as possible and ensure individuals in the contaminated room are evacuated to an adjacent unoccupied room away from the hazard (see section F).
- If there has been a suspected chemical incident ensure personnel leave the room as quickly as possible. Possible signs that people have been exposed will be streaming eyes, coughs and irritated skin. Seek immediate medical advice (see section F).
- **Notify your BUILDING MANAGER who should:**
 - Switch off the building air conditioning system
 - Close all fire doors in the building
 - Close all windows in the rest of the building

In addition it is advised that:

- You should not clean up any spilled powder
- If clothing is heavily contaminated, do not attempt to brush off any powder- it is better to remove the clothing carefully during decontamination

RESPONDING TO SUSPECT PACKAGES AND MATERIALS – ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

C. IDENTIFICATION OF SUSPECT MATERIAL AND WHAT TO DO

Suspect material is material that is something unusual and found in unexpected circumstances. Individual judgement should be made to try and identify such material but advice should be sought from the Police.

Guidance about suspect material is as follows:

- Do not touch the suspect material
- If inside a building, shut windows and doors in the room and leave the room. Keep yourself separate from others who may have not been exposed. Make sure you are available for medical examination. Switch off any room air conditioning system and notify building manager.
- If outside and in an open space, stay away from the material and warn others. Seek further support and assistance from the police.

In addition it is advised that:

- You should not clean up any spilled powder
- If clothing is heavily contaminated, do not attempt to brush off any powder- it is better to remove the clothing carefully during decontamination

D. WHAT TO DO IF ANYONE BELIEVES THEY HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO CHEMICAL/ BIOLOGICAL MATERIAL

- Remain calm
- Do not touch your eyes, nose or any other part of the body
- Wash your hands in ordinary soapy water where facilities are provided, but staff movement outside contained locations should be avoided as much as possible
- Notify police immediately using the 999 system
- Keep all persons exposed to the material separate from others and available for medical attention
- Other people should assemble at a safe distance from the incident. They should not leave the area and should continue to be guided by the police and the other emergency services.

RESPONDING TO SUSPECT PACKAGES AND MATERIALS – ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

E. RISK ASSESSMENT

Risk or threat assessment **by the police** is the key to managing these incidents. They will quickly advise on whether people who were potentially exposed to any contents of the package or suspect material should remain separate from others and await medical attention. A proper description of the package or suspect material and what has happened to it is **essential**. This is the basis on which all subsequent action is determined.

On the basis of the story from the recipient of the package or the suspect material and their own observation, the police will put the incident into one of two categories, "Credible threat" or "No credible threat", (**See Algorithm page 7**). The local Consultant in Communicable Disease Control (CCDC) should be involved in all credible threat incidents, and kept informed of the risk assessment and progress.

- **No credible threat.** In most cases, initial assessment of the letter/package or suspect material by the police will provide reassurance that it is a false alarm, or it may obviously be a hoax. No further action will be taken.
- **Credible threat.** These are packages or suspect material felt by the police to have features which warrant deployment of the full panoply of specialist support.

F. PUBLIC HEALTH AND MEDICAL MANAGEMENT

- **If the police assessment is declared "No credible threat"**

The police will advise that the package or suspect material can be handled as normal or may be discarded. No clinical, laboratory or public health action should be taken. There is no need for environmental specimens to be taken. The people who might have been exposed must be informed and reassured.

- **If the police assessment is declared a "Credible threat"**

Once the police have completed their assessment, the package or suspect material will be taken by the police and sent to a national specialist laboratory for testing of environmental samples (usually the one at Porton Down, not to a local NHS or HPA or medical toxicology laboratory).

- The police will define who has been potentially exposed. This will include all people who have been in the room with the open package or suspect material and people who moved through any contaminated area (e.g. a corridor). Also people in contact with material in an open space may be identified as potentially exposed.
- Those potentially exposed will be decontaminated by the emergency services if necessary, with all clothing and personal items removed, bagged, sealed and secured. Alternative clothing is provided.
- A list of those exposed must be made by a health professional. Names, addresses, telephone numbers, and GP details (name and telephone number) should be recorded and passed to the CCDC or deputy.

RESPONDING TO SUSPECT PACKAGES AND MATERIALS – ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

- Because early treatment for anthrax is important, if chemoprophylaxis is required, this should be started as soon as possible. **Antibiotics should be provided at the scene or the aftercare location – preferably given or arranged by the CCDC.** There is no reason to give antibiotics more widely.
- DH have developed Patient Group Directions which allow certain medicines to be given as countermeasures to groups of patients in emergency situations http://www.dh.gov.uk/PolicyAndGuidance/EmergencyPlanning/EmergencyPreparedness/Article/fs/en?CONTENT_ID=4069610&chk=in7ZEF
- Depending on the suspected agent, further medical advice is likely to be needed and those exposed may require assessment or treatment at a local Accident and Emergency Department after decontamination.
- However people do not need to go to hospital if they are uninjured and have no symptoms.
- Aftercare should be arranged for those exposed who may be sent home. For example they may be anxious and will have handed in wallets, keys etc. and should be looked after (e.g. by the Local Authority).
- Any building or exposed areas involved should remain closed until the results from the sample are received. Heating or air conditioning should remain off. Advice should be sought about continued use of other parts of the building, particularly if it has an air conditioning system.

If the results are negative:

The exposed persons should be contacted, for example by the CCDC, and told the result. They should be assured and told to stop the antibiotics or other treatment as appropriate. Clothes and personal items will be returned. The exposed room/areas can be used as usual.

If the results confirm a biological or chemical agent was present in the sample:

- ◆ The exposed persons will need to be contacted, preferably by the CCDC or their deputy. Their GP will be contacted and further treatment given as recommended.
- ◆ In particular if the results are positive for anthrax arrangements need to be made to give 60 days antibiotics and to initiate anthrax vaccination – DH will release anthrax vaccine.
- ◆ The exposed room/areas must remain sealed off because this is now officially a crime scene and the police will need to investigate. Only then, can the room be decontaminated. Heating or air conditioning must stay off. Advice should be sought about continued use of other parts of the building, particularly if it has an air conditioning system.
- ◆ Clothing will need decontamination or disposal by autoclaving or incineration.

This is now a Major Incident and the Health Protection Agency Emergency Response Division (ERD) will advise on further medical action.

RESPONDING TO SUSPECT PACKAGES AND MATERIALS – ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN

