

BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL HAZARDS IN LETTERS/PACKAGES

THE THREAT IS REAL AND SHOULD BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY

In the past several weeks, an increasing level of threat has been experienced by individuals and organizations from both chemical and biological hazards being sent through public mail systems. The apparent intent of these threats is to cause either physical damage or anxiety to people and organizations. While these threats must always be taken seriously, there are some common sense actions and approaches to them that we can take to minimize their potential impacts.

I urge all members of the University of Alaska community to be extremely vigilant and careful in handling all mail, both on campus and in their homes. Everyone should pay very close attention to national reports, and take this issue very seriously.

The University of Alaska System requests that you carefully review the CDC Health Advisory at: <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/ehsrms/Anthrax.htm> as well as an illustrative poster found at: <http://ancmail1.state.ak.us/poster.pdf> as we prepare ourselves for our handling of these situations.

The following information, which is based on the above and other reliable sources of information and data, provides the details about procedures that should be implemented at each campus to reduce this risk to all UA personnel.

1. THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF SCREENING ALL PACKAGES AND LETTERS

Many ***BIOLOGICAL OR CHEMICAL THREATS*** can be controlled by screening of ALL incoming materials and by following simple evaluation protocols as early in the mail system as possible. Following the procedures listed below will promote the highest level of safety while minimizing the disruption associated with these incidents. We have an excellent opportunity to ensure that these kinds of incidents do not harm anyone in the University of Alaska System.

Some ***COMMON FEATURES OF SUSPECT ARTICLES*** (although not all of these features may be present) include:

- A threatening word or phrase such as “Anthrax”, or “DANGER: Smallpox” on the outside of the envelope or package;
- Items protruding from the envelope or package, wet areas, stains, openings, or strange odors;
- Unusually heavy letter/package and/or the presence of small bulges that may contain powder or granules;
- Liquid leaking or moving around inside a letter/package;
- No return address or no clear postmark;
- Hand written or poorly typed information, such as name or address;
- Misspelling of common words, names or places;
- Restrictive markings such as “Confidential”, “Personal”, etc.;
- Foreign post marks and/or writing in a language unfamiliar to you;
- Source of the letter / package is not recognized by recipient / addressee;

2. IF YOU RECEIVE A LETTER/PACKAGE OR NOTE THAT THREATENS YOU OR YOUR ORGANIZATION WITH A BIOHAZARD (i.e., ANTHRAX/SMALL POX) OR OTHER SUSPECTED SUBSTANCES:

- A. RELAX AND REMAIN CALM – Although any threatened use of a biological agent must be treated as though it is real and serious, experience has demonstrated that such threats are likely a HOAX. If a suspected biological agent is reported as anthrax, be assured that it is NOT generally contagious (i.e., spread from person to person) and that treatment is available and effective if administered before the onset of symptoms. Symptoms generally can take hours or even days before they appear, so letting your supervisor and authorities know immediately that you have received a suspect article via mail is very important in both the identification and evaluation of the threat.
- B. DO NOT OPEN THE LETTER OR PACKAGE – in almost all instances, chemical or biological contents of a letter or package pose no threat if they are unopened or contact with any contents is minimized. Also, *do not shake* the suspect letter or package, as this can increase spread of any contamination over a larger area.
- C. LEAVE THE ROOM WHERE THE SUSPICIOUS ARTICLE IS LOCATED – take the following actions to ensure your safety and that of others:
- Leave yourself and instruct others around you to do the same;
 - Close all access doors to prevent potential exposures to other personnel and nearby areas;
 - Make a list of those persons who were in the immediate area when the article was received;
 - Write down all the details you can remember associated with the incident, as well as what was happening prior to receipt of the suspect article.
- D. CONTACT BOTH UNIVERSITY and LOCAL POLICE – do this as soon as you can by calling local emergency numbers. While awaiting for them to respond, do the following important tasks:
- Do not allow others to enter the room, office or lab until notified by emergency responders that it is safe to do so;
 - Do not leave the building until instructed to do so by local police responders;
 - Provide your information to public responders and health care officials.
- E. REMAIN AT THE LOCATION UNTIL POLICE ARRIVE WITH INSTRUCTIONS – Police and Healthcare responders can evaluate the risk to those in a room, office or laboratory at the time of a potential exposure, as well as assessing any impact on the remainder of the building and its occupants.

3. IF YOU DO OPEN A SUSPECT LETTER OR PACKAGE, OR IT APPEARS TO BE LEAKING ANY LIQUID OR UNKNOWN SUBSTANCE:

- A. IMMEDIATELY AND GENTLY SET THE ITEM DOWN ON A FLAT SURFACE – this is critical to preventing the spread of any material present over a much wider area. Try not to touch anything else with your hands, as this may also spread any materials outside the original package.
- B. CONTACT BOTH UNIVERSITY AND LOCAL POLICE IMMEDIATELY – if you are alone, go to the nearest telephone and make these calls; better yet, get someone else's attention outside the immediate area and have them place the initial calls for you while you carry out the decontamination actions below.

- C. COVER THE SUSPECT ARTICLE WITH SOMETHING – use paper, clothing, or a trash container – anything will help prevent possible spread of contamination.
- D. ASK A NON-EXPOSED PERSON TO KEEP OTHERS OUTSIDE THE AREA - This will help to minimize further exposure to personnel.
- E. NOTIFY ALL POTENTIALLY EXPOSED PERSONS THEY SHOULD WASH EXPOSED SKIN SURFACES WITH SOAP AND RUNNING RINSE WATER FOR AT LEAST 15 MINUTES – this is important to both prevent the spread of any potentially infectious material to others, as well as prevent infection to yourself through any openings on your skin.
- F. RETURN TO THE AREA WITHIN THE BUILDING ADJACENT TO THE INITIAL EXPOSURE AND WAIT FOR THE POLICE (FOR EXAMPLE, IN A HALLWAY OUTSIDE THE CONTAMINATED ROOM) – this is important that you minimize your movements within the area to limit potential exposure from a biological or chemical hazard to others in the area. Prepare the following information for the emergency responders and health officials:
 - Make a list of those persons who were in the immediate area when the article was received;
 - Write down all the details you can remember associated with the incident, as well as what was happening prior to receipt of the suspect article.
- G. AVOID DISCUSSING THE INCIDENT WITH OTHERS UNTIL MEETING WITH UNIVERSITY OFFICIALS – The official representative for disclosure of public information related to the University of Alaska is Robert Miller. Please notify him after you have taken care of important health and public safety response issues.

Please ensure this information is forwarded to all UA personnel who either handle or receive public mail. Also, make sure that a copy gets posted in each building mailroom and all mail staging areas. Please communicate this information to your staff personnel in department meetings at the earliest possible opportunity.

If you have any questions or comments on the contents of this message, do not hesitate to contact me using the information below.

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