

Response To Unknown Substance: Chemical/Biological Threats In The Workplace

The appropriate response to finding an unknown substance in a letter or package is not much different than responding to a mail bomb or any other emergency or potential threat that may present itself in the work environment. The keys, as with any effective response is to have a plan, be sure that all employees know the plan and that they are prepared for their role and responsibility. The following is a suggested response to a suspicious and/or unknown substance that may be found in a letter or package received at your facility.

I. Identification of suspicious item:

The methods of identifying a suspicious item that may contain a chemical/biological threat or hazard is much like the identification methods for identifying a potential mail or letter bomb. Some characteristics of a mail/letter bomb that can be applied to potential chemical or biological mail threats are:

- Excessive Postage
- Incorrect Titles
- Titles but no Names
- Misspellings of Common Words
- Oily Stains or Discolorations
- No Return Address
- Excessive Weight
- Rigid Envelope
- Lopsided or Uneven Envelope
- Protruding Wires or Tin Foil
- Visual Distractions
- Foreign Mail, Air Mail and Special Delivery
- Restrictive Markings such as Confidential, Personal, etc.
- Handwritten or Poorly Typed Addresses
- Excessive Securing Material such as Masking Tape, String, etc

II. If suspicious item is identified prior to opening:

1. Isolate the item in a leak proof plastic bag, such as a Ziploc or garbage bag.
2. Place the item in an area that will not affect personnel if it is a real threat.
Sealed off or isolated room .
3. Mark off the area and allow no one to approach the item in question.
4. Notify appropriate authorities. Let them handle and positively identify the item.

III. If suspicious item is opened:

1. The person opening the item should immediately place the item in a wastebasket with a leak proof liner.
2. Fold the liner in on the item and place a heavy object on top to secure it. A phone book is ideal for this purpose as it is heavy, usually convenient and can be easily replaced. **DO NOT** take the item around the office or call others to the exposed area to question them about it! The goal is to limit the potential contamination to as small an area and as few people as possible.
3. The person opening the item should now be considered contaminated. Any one who comes in contact with this person should also be considered contaminated. Isolate all persons who have been in contact with the suspicious item.
4. Begin evacuation of the immediate or exposed area first, moving outward to less exposed areas closing off and designating evacuated area. **Note:** never move anyone from a safe area through the contaminated area just to get them out of the building.
5. Have maintenance turn off the ventilation system to keep the potential threat from spreading to other areas of the building through the building ventilation system.
6. Notify appropriate authorities immediately.
7. If possible, with out contaminating other persons or areas. Have the exposed personnel wash with water and soap (preferably a liquid detergent) all exposed skin. The goal is to keep the unknown agent mobile on the skin and not allow it to penetrate while flushing as much as possible off the skin. Flush eyes mouth and any other membrane areas that may have been exposed. Remove all clothing that may be contaminated (this is no time for modesty). They should continue to wash until appropriate authorities can control them with proper decontamination procedures.

Most threats are false or a hoax designed to cause confusion or panic. Unfortunately it is hard to tell if a threat is real or false. But an effective response plan will go a long way in minimizing the effects of threats in the work environment. As with any other threat or emergency, personnel should remain calm. A chain of command should be established, so panic and confusion are kept to a minimum. The key to an effective response plan for any emergency is employee awareness and training.