



**Are Your Mailroom Employees Worried About Anthrax?
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Since the October 2001 Anthrax attacks, mailroom employees are asking questions about their risk and possible protections. A great deal of information is currently available about Anthrax and the health effects of the disease, but most of these sources are not giving organizations insight into how to protect their employees from exposure. To remove some of the fear and panic surrounding the potential for being exposed to Anthrax, Safety and Health Professionals need to use the basic principals of industrial hygiene that we use each and every day to provide workers with the guidance need to protect themselves.

Anthrax is a disease that can spread to humans coming in contact with spores by touching, breathing, or swallowing. Based upon recent events, it appears that our most at-risk employees are those who handle our mail or packages. How can we control this hazard should a contaminated document pass through our mailroom? The best way to protect our employees is before the exposure, not after the contaminated material arrives.

So, how do we protect those people in the mailroom, especially when it is so difficult to tell if a piece of mail could be contaminated? We use personal protective equipment, just like we do in the hospital and the factory worksite.

With some forms of Anthrax there is a potential for an inhalation or breathing exposure. Therefore, a respirator is needed. No, your workers don't need a gas mask. Adequate protection will be provided by a dust mask or filtering face-piece respirator that has a P-100 filtering media. Anthrax spores are particulates or dusts. The P-100 filter provides the best level of filtration. Employees can wear this type mask comfortably for reasonably long periods. In addition, voluntary use of filtering face piece respirators does not require the development of a full-blown OSHA compliant respiratory protection program. The only problem with this approach is employees with asthma or impaired respiratory functions may not be able to wear any respiratory device successfully and may need to be reassigned.

And, because some forms of Anthrax attack the skin we also need to be concerned about skin exposure. Here, the use of gloves will help. A latex, vinyl, or nitrile glove of 5 mm thickness or better should be adequate. The concern here is to have a glove thick enough to provide puncture protection but not interfere with the performance of the mailroom tasks. And, if the employee wears long sleeves with their gloves, then skin contact should be minimized. This procedure may not be adequate if the mail handlers are opening the mail. If that is the case, you may want to provide them with a tyvek coverall in addition to the respirator and gloves.

These recommendations should be adequate to protect mailroom employees while performing the mail sorting and delivery task. But, these personal protective equipment recommendations are not a substitute for the procedures recommended by the U.S. Postal Service for handling suspicious pieces of mail. If a piece of mail is obviously suspicious, employees should not handle it.

The main thing to remember is “do not panic.” Provide and encourage the use of the appropriate personal protective equipment for workers engaged in mail handling. Purchase equipment that fits the worker comfortably and train them in their safe use and maintenance. Most workers will never be exposed to anthrax in the mailroom, but it is better to be safe than sorry.

Here are some good web-based resources:

U.S. Postal Service

www.usps.gov/news/2001/press/pro1_1010tips_print.htm

Centers for Disease Control

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/anthrax_g.htm