



City of Philadelphia Department of Public Health Division of Disease Control

Protocol for Responding to Letters/Packages Containing Threat of a Biological Agent (i.e., Anthrax) October 12, 2001

A surge in in bioterrorism threats, or perceived threats, has recently occurred in public and private agencies across the US, including Philadelphia. Most have been caused by letters advising the reader that “anthrax” was contained within the envelope. All of these alleged or threatened releases of biological agents have been hoaxes to date, although the route of infection for the recent anthrax cases in Florida is still under investigation.

The City of Philadelphia has a standard operating procedure by which it responds to threatened or implied use of biologic agents as weapons. This protocol involves a multi-agency response to secure and assess the scene, determine the need for decontamination, and evaluate exposed persons for medical prophylaxis. The purpose of this public health alert is to ensure that persons who might receive a threat or provide care to a person receiving a threat of bioterrorism be apprised as to proper notifications and procedures.

1. If a threatening or “suspect” letter or package containing powder or dust is opened, **REMAIN CALM**. Most biological agents have an incubation period of 1-10 days, and there is no immediate risk of injury following exposure. Moreover, agents such as anthrax are harmful when aerosolized, or released into the air, not when contained in an envelope or residing on an environmental surface. Try to minimize spread or dispersal of the powder or agent.
2. Call **911**, or have a supervisor call **911**, and explain the situation to the dispatcher in the Fire Communications Center. The Fire Communications Center will arrange for all appropriate City responders to arrive on scene.
3. Contact (or direct someone to contact) the Building Manager or an equivalent, and explain the situation. If your building or organization has a safety manager, contact that individual.

4. If you are contaminated with powder, do not leave the area, and try to minimize the number of people who come into contact with the powder.
5. Do not throw away anything – the powder and the letter or package in which it came are all evidence.
6. First responders from the Philadelphia Fire Department will arrive and define a “hot zone,” secure the scene and assess need for decontamination and emergency medical assistance.
7. The FBI will collect and arrange for testing of the material, if necessary, and determine the credibility of the threat.
8. The Philadelphia Department of Public Health (PDPH) will assess the need for decontamination, determine if post-exposure prophylaxis is necessary, and collect contact information from all potentially exposed persons. Building managers, safety managers or organization directors should be prepared to assist PDPH in collecting that information.
9. If material is sent for diagnostic testing, a representative from PDPH will contact exposed individuals with the results of testing, and provide additional recommendations regarding prophylaxis and the need for medical follow-up.
10. The environment in direct contact with the letter or its contents should be decontaminated with a 0.5% bleach solution (e.g., one part household bleach to 10 parts water), following the crime scene investigation. Personal effects may be decontaminated similarly.

**Contact the Division of Disease Control at 215-685-6740
if You Have Questions**