

## PUBLIC HEALTH AND WORKPLACE SAFETY

### BACKGROUND

In the past, concerns have been raised over the potential use of the U.S. Postal Service to conduct bioterrorist activity. In both New York and in Washington D.C., contents of three or four envelopes were tested positive for anthrax. In those cases where positive results were recorded, public health authorities dealt with this issue.

The purpose of this memorandum is to provide guidelines for the handling of mail in the Boston Public Schools. In providing these guidelines, it is important to note that we have been informed by the Boston Public Health Commission that there have been no confirmed anthrax cases reported in either the Boston Public Schools or in the City of Boston.

Your School Emergency Operations Plan (flip chart) will serve as action reference on this subject.

### GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are effective immediately and shall remain in place until otherwise ordered:

1. Every responsibility center should assign one person and a backup person to sort and distribute mail. That person shall be supplied with rubber gloves and plastic bags to be used at his or her discretion. Training in the safe handling of mail will be provided.
2. Techniques for safe handling of routine mail include the following:
  - Examine all mail before opening to determine if it is suspicious.
  - Isolate suspicious mail in a plastic bag.
  - Open mail with a letter opener over a hard cleanable surface, holding the envelope upright so that the contents will not spill out.
  - Examine the inside contents prior to removal.
  - Never shake or wave any mail or contents of letters/packages.
  - Insure that food or drinks are not in the area while mail is handled.
3. All mail and packages sent to internal offices/departments through the courier service should be sealed by the sender and the name and return address of the sending office clearly marked on the envelope/package.
4. Characteristics of suspicious letters and packages include the following:
  - No return address.
  - Return address **not** matching city/state on the postmark.
  - Stained, discolored mail or mail with an odor.
  - Excessive postage/excessive weight.
  - Lopsided or uneven envelope/packaging.
  - Improper address, illegible or poorly written address
  - Mail with visual threats on packaging materials.
  - Unexpected mail with an international postmark.

- Ticking sound.
  - Any combination of the aforementioned characteristics.
5. Suspicious mail or packages should **NOT** be opened or jostled. It should be placed in a plastic bag and ***isolated*** for inspection by the responsibility center manager.
  6. If suspicious mail is already opened, it should be left on the desk/table and should **NOT** be handled further. It is suggested that it be covered with a plastic trash bag and the immediate area closed off. Refer to items 8 and 9 and follow the procedures outlined.
  7. If any powder or suspicious substance spills out of the envelope cover it, close off and leave the immediate area, wash your hands with soap and water and notify your responsibility center manager.
  8. When suspicious mail has been received, the responsibility center manager should call 911 and notify Superintendents Office. Our protocol does ***not*** call for evacuation of the building unless so directed by public safety officials.
  9. All persons who handled suspicious letters/packages should wash their hands with soap and water.

Attached for informational and review purposes are public health fact sheets prepared by the Boston Public Health Commission. Please keep this memorandum available for reference.

For more information about this circular, contact:

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Carol R. Johnson, Superintendent



Public Health Fact Sheet  
Communicable Disease Control  
1010 Massachusetts Ave, Boston MA. 02118  
617-534-5611

## Anthrax

### What is anthrax?

Anthrax is a disease caused by bacteria called *Bacillus anthracis*. Anthrax most commonly occurs in animals, but it can also infect people. Anthrax has the potential to be used as a biological weapon. In late 2001, terrorism related Anthrax cases were found in Connecticut, New York City, New Jersey, Florida and Washington DC.

### How is anthrax spread?

Anthrax can be spread by touching it (when there's a cut on the skin), breathing it in, or eating meat contaminated with Anthrax. It is not contagious. An infected person cannot give it to others.

### What are the symptoms of anthrax?

Symptoms of the disease vary depending on how the disease was contracted, and usually occur within 7 days, but can take up to 60 days to appear.

- **Cutaneous (skin form):** Most anthrax infections occur when bacteria enter the skin. The infection begins as a raised itchy bump that resembles an insect bite, but within several days develops into a blister. The blister ulcerates and forms a black area in the center. With prompt treatment, the vast majority of people recover fully.
- **Inhalation:** Initial symptoms may resemble the flu with fever, chills, and muscle aches. After several days, the symptoms progress to severe breathing problems and shock. In the past, death occurred 1-2 days after the onset of symptoms. However, during the recent outbreak of anthrax in the United States, with prompt treatment more than half of the people who developed inhalation anthrax survived.
- **Intestinal:** This form of anthrax occurs from eating contaminated meat. Symptoms include nausea, loss of appetite, vomiting, fever, and are followed by abdominal pain, vomiting of blood, and severe diarrhea.

### Can I acquire anthrax from another person?

Person-to-person spread of anthrax is not known to occur. Only people directly exposed to anthrax spores could develop disease.

### Is there an anthrax vaccine?

There is a limited amount of anthrax vaccine available in the United States, however, most people are not routinely vaccinated against anthrax unless they fall into a high risk group such as military personnel. The anthrax vaccine requires 6 shots over a period of 18 months with follow-up shots. Anthrax vaccines intended for animals should not be used in humans.

### Is there a treatment for anthrax?

Doctors can prescribe antibiotics that work against anthrax. To be effective, treatment should be initiated early. If left untreated, the disease can be fatal. In Massachusetts, all cases of suspected anthrax are required to be reported immediately to local health departments. In Boston, suspected cases should be reported to Boston Public Health Commission at 617-534-5611.

For more information call the  
BPHC Bioterrorism Information Line at 617-534-2362  
or visit <http://www.bphc.org>



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**Bioterrorism**

**What is Bioterrorism?**

Bioterrorism is a form of terrorism in which infectious biological agents, such as bacteria, viruses, or toxins are used (or are threatened to be used) against another person to create fear and disrupt normal daily activities. Use or threatened use of such agents is a Federal crime and is thoroughly investigated by the Boston Police Department, FBI, and other agencies.

**What is the Boston Public Health Commission doing to prepare for a possible bioterrorist event?**

The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) has been preparing for potential bioterrorism for several years. BPHC has been working with health care providers and others in the city to develop an early warning system for possible bioterrorist attacks. This system will allow city officials time to implement steps to prevent further illness.

**How will I know if I have been exposed to an infectious biological agent?**

Most bioterrorist threats to date have been hoaxes, so often people only *think* they have been exposed to a bioterrorist agent. If you suspect you have been exposed to a biological agent, notify emergency personnel immediately by calling 911. Boston Police, Fire, Emergency Medical Services, and Public Health Commission will work together to collect and identify the suspect material.

**If I actually were exposed to an infectious biological agent, what symptoms should I look for?**

Different viruses, bacteria, and toxins may be used as bioterrorism agents, and each may cause different symptoms. Often however, they resemble either the flu or food poisoning. People who are exposed may experience fever, chills, headache, body aches, and muscle weakness. Others may experience coughing, diarrhea, abdominal cramping, nausea and vomiting. It is important to remember that these symptoms are common of many illnesses and are not usually the result of bioterrorist events.

**How long would it take for symptoms to appear?**

The length of time it takes for symptoms to appear can vary greatly depending on the type of agent used. Symptoms can appear between several hours to several weeks after exposure.

**What can be done if I am exposed to a biological agent?**

For many of these agents, treatment is available. However, it is very important that for treatment to begin early. Therefore, if you suspect you may have been exposed to one of these agents, see a health care provider as soon as possible.

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