



Gary M. Feldman, M.D., FAAP, FABMG
Director

Memorandum

TO: COUNTY DEPARTMENTS
FROM: Gary M. Feldman, M.D., Public Health Officer
Date: February 5, 2004
SUBJ: HANDLING MAIL AND OTHER SUSPICIOUS ITEMS

In light of the recent discovery of ricin in the mailroom of Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist's office, the Department of Public Health (DOPH) is disseminating guidelines for handling such incidents. These guidelines have been developed in conjunction with Riverside County Fire, Riverside County Environmental Health HazMat and Riverside County Sheriff's Department and are in accordance with those provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Ricin is a poison that is produced from the waste product of castor beans. It can be found in powder, mist, or pellet form, or it can be dissolved in water or a weak acid. Routes of exposure to ricin include inhalation (from powder or mist), ingestion (contaminated food or water), or injection (liquid form). Ricin poisoning is not contagious and cannot be spread from person to person.

Accidental exposure to ricin is highly unlikely, and it would take a deliberate act to make ricin and use it as a covert agent. There is no antidote for ricin poisoning, and death could take place within 36 to 48 hours of exposure, due to respiratory or multi-system organ failure. Ricin poisoning victims are treated supportively to minimize the effects. Persons without complications for more than five days are likely to survive the poisoning.

Guidelines for handling suspicious envelopes or other items received are on the attached sheets.

Please contact Kim Saruwatari, Chief of the Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Branch, at (909) 358-7100 if you have any questions regarding this information.

HOW TO HANDLE ANTHRAX, RICIN and OTHER BIOLOGICAL or CHEMICAL AGENTS (WHITE POWDER) THREATS

A. HOW TO IDENTIFY SUSPICIOUS PACKAGES AND LETTERS:

SOME CHARACTERISTICS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- EXCESSIVE POSTAGE
- WRITTEN THREAT (E.G., “ANTHRAX”) ANYWHERE ON PACKAGE OR LETTER
- HANDWRITTEN OR POORLY TYPED ADDRESSES
- INCORRECT TITLES
- TITLE, BUT NO NAME
- MISSPELLINGS OF COMMON WORDS
- OILY STAINS, DISCOLORATIONS OR ODOR
- NO RETURN ADDRESS
- EXCESSIVE WEIGHT
- LOPSIDED OR UNEVEN ENVELOPE
- PROTRUDING WIRES OR ALUMINUM FOIL
- EXCESSIVE SECURITY MATERIAL SUCH AS MASKING TAPE, STRING, ETC.
- VISUAL DISTRACTIONS
- TICKING SOUND
- MARKED WITH RESTRICTIVE ENDORSEMENTS, SUCH AS “PERSONAL” OR “CONFIDENTIAL”
- SHOWS A CITY OR STATE IN THE POSTMARK THAT DOES NOT MATCH THE RETURN ADDRESS

B. SUSPICIOUS UNOPENED LETTER or PACKAGE MARKED WITH THREATENING MESSAGE, SUCH AS “ANTHRAX”:

1. Leave the letter or package alone and call local police. Do not sniff, touch, taste, or look closely at it or at any contents which may have spilled.
2. **LEAVE** the room and **CLOSE** the door, or section off the area to prevent others from entering (e.g., keep others away).
3. **WASH** your hands with soap and water.
4. **CONSIDER** closing off local fans or ventilation systems to the affected area (NOTE: discussion must occur to determine if the affected area has a critical ventilation system – e.g., negative pressure isolation rooms, jails, laboratory facilities, etc – these systems may not be reasonable to turn off).
5. What to do next:
 - a. If you are at **HOME**, dial 9-1-1 to report the incident to local police.
 - b. If you are at **WORK**, dial 9-1-1 to report the incident to the local police, and notify your building security official or an available supervisor.

HOW TO HANDLE ANTHRAX, RICIN and OTHER BIOLOGICAL or CHEMICAL AGENTS (WHITE POWDER) THREATS

6. **LIST** all persons and their contact information (e.g., address, telephone number) that were in the room or area from the time when this suspicious letter or package was delivered to the time when it was recognized. Give this list to law enforcement or officials. Law enforcement will forward the information to the local public health authorities for any necessary follow-up.

C. POWDER SPILLS OUT OF ENVELOPE/PACKAGE ONTO SURFACE AND POSSIBLY AEROSOLIZES:

1. **DO NOT** try to **CLEAN UP** the powder. Do not sniff, touch, taste, or look closely at it or at any contents which may have spilled. Leave it alone!

2. **LEAVE** the room and **CLOSE** the door, or section off the area to prevent others from entering (e.g., keep others away).

3. **WASH** your hands with soap and water to prevent spreading any powder to your face.

4. **CONSIDER** closing off local fans or ventilation systems to the affected area (NOTE: discussion must occur to determine if the affected area has a critical ventilation system – e.g., negative pressure isolation rooms, jails, laboratory facilities, etc – these systems may not be reasonable to turn off).

5. What to do next:

a. If you are at **HOME**, dial 9-1-1 to report the incident to local police.

b. If you are at **WORK**, dial 9-1-1 to report the incident to the local police, and notify your building security official or an available supervisor.

6. **REMOVE** any possibly contaminated clothing as soon as possible. Any clothing that would normally be pulled over the head should be cut off the body to prevent any further aerosol particulates of material. Place clothing in a plastic bag or some other container that can be sealed. This clothing bag should be given to the emergency responders for proper handling.

7. **SHOWER** with soap and water as soon as possible. Do not use bleach or other disinfectant on your skin.

8. **LIST** all persons and their contact information (e.g., address, telephone number) that were in the room or area from the time when this suspicious letter or package was delivered to the time when it was recognized. Give this list to law enforcement officials for further investigation. Law enforcement will forward the information to the local public health authorities so that proper instructions can be given for medical follow-up.

F a c t s A b o u t R i c i n

What is ricin?

- Ricin is a poison that can be produced from the waste products of castor beans.
- It can be in powder, mist, or pellet form, or it can be dissolved in water or a weak acid.
- It is not affected much by extreme conditions such as very hot or cold temperatures.

Where is ricin found and how is it used?

- Castor oil is produced from castor beans throughout the world. Ricin is from the waste “mash” when castor oil is made. Amateurs can make ricin from castor beans.
- The toxin has some potential medical uses, such as bone marrow transplants and cancer treatment (to kill cancer cells).

How can people be exposed to ricin?

- Accidental exposure to ricin is highly unlikely and it would take a deliberate act to make ricin and use it to poison people.
- People can breathe in ricin mist or powder, and drink contaminated food and water.
- Ricin dissolved in a liquid, can be injected into people’s bodies.
- Ricin poisoning is not contagious. It cannot be spread from person to person through casual contact.

What are the signs and symptoms of ricin exposure?

- **Inhalation:** Within a few hours of inhaling significant amounts of ricin, the likely symptoms would be coughing, tightness in the chest, difficulty breathing, nausea, and aching muscles. Within the next few hours, the body’s airways (lungs) would become severely inflamed (swollen and hot), excess fluid would build up in the lungs, breathing would become even more difficult, and the skin might turn blue. Excess fluid in the lungs would be diagnosed by x-ray or by listening to the chest with a stethoscope.
- **Ingestion:** If someone swallows a significant amount of ricin, he or she would have internal bleeding of the stomach and intestines that would lead to vomiting and bloody diarrhea. Eventually the person’s liver, spleen, and kidneys might stop working, and the person could die.
- **Injection:** Injection of a lethal amount of ricin at first would cause the muscles and lymph nodes near the injection site to die. Eventually, the liver, kidneys, and spleen would stop working, and the person would have massive bleeding from the stomach and intestines. The person would die from multiple organ failure.

F a c t s A b o u t R i c i n

- Death from ricin poisoning could take place within 36 to 48 hours of exposure, whether by injection, ingestion, or inhalation. If the person lives longer than 5 days without complications, he or she will probably not die.
- Showing these signs and symptoms does not necessarily mean that a person has been exposed to ricin.

How is ricin poisoning treated?

No antidote exists for ricin. Ricin poisoning victims are treated supportively to minimize the effects of the poisoning. The types of supportive medical care would depend on several factors, such as the route by which the victim was poisoned (that is, by inhalation, ingestion, or injection). Care could include such measures as helping the victim breathe and giving him or her intravenous fluids and medications to treat swelling.

What can people do if they think they may have been exposed to ricin?

Unintentional ricin poisoning is highly unlikely. If people think they might have been exposed to ricin they should contact the California Poison Control System at 1-800-876-4766.

How can people get more information about ricin?

They can contact one of the following:

- California Poison Control System 1-800-876-4766
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
 - * Public Response Hotline (CDC)
 - English (888) 246-2675
 - Español (888) 246-2857
 - TTY (866) 874-2646
 - * Emergency Preparedness and Response Web site: <http://www.bt.cdc.gov/>
- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) (1-888-422-8737)