

**Los Angeles County – Department of Health Services  
Current Guidelines for Mail Handling**

October 16, 2001

The recent anthrax cases in Florida, New York and Nevada have generated concern about handling and opening mail and packages. It is important to note that the recent anthrax cases are linked to mail that was “suspicious” or very different from the regular mail received by companies. While there have been numerous incidents reported nationwide, it is important to remember that the vast majority have been hoaxes.

Los Angeles County offices and facilities receive thousands of pieces of mail each day that are essential to the work we do. These questions and answers have been developed to provide guidelines for dealing with the mail and packages you receive so that we can continue our important work with the least possible disruption.

**Q. What should I know about carrying and transporting mail?**

A. You should deliver the mail or pick up mail from the mail station as usual. General guidelines for handling mail include:

- Wash your hands with warm soap and water after handling any suspicious item of mail.
- Do not eat, drink or smoke around mail.
- If you see a suspicious package (see below) set it aside, and follow the instructions below. Otherwise distribute the mail as you regularly would.

**Q. What should I know about opening mail?**

A. You should take care in opening mail at all times. Follow these steps:

- Do not eat, drink or smoke around mail.
- Inspect all mail prior to opening it; setting aside any mail that may be suspicious (see below).
- Open the mail in a different area of your workstation to keep it from contacting your routine papers and work.
- If you come across mail you think is suspicious, then isolate it in a designated space away from your workstation and contact your supervisor.
- If you come into contact with any substance contained in the envelope or package:
  - Do not panic; remember that almost all of these substances are likely to be harmless.
  - Do not shake or empty the envelope.
  - Do not smell or taste any suspicious substance.
  - Is there a protrusion of wires or do you suspect a bomb?
  - If so, evacuate the entire area and call the Bomb Squad.
  - Put suspicious mail down and leave the immediate area. Evacuation of the entire workplace is NOT necessary at this point.
- Contact your supervisor.
- Wash your hands with soap and water.

**Q. What is suspicious mail?**

A. Suspicious mail:

- Does not come from a regular source from which you normally receive mail.
- Is unexpected or from an agency or person unfamiliar to you.
- Is addressed to someone no longer with your organization.
- Weighs more or less than they should given their size
- Is lopsided or oddly shaped

- Is marked with restrictive endorsement "hand deliver only to", confidential, personal.
- Has no return address.
- Shows a city or state in the postmark that doesn't match the return address
- Has protruding wires, have strange stains or strong odor, are leaking powdery substances

**Q. What do I do with a suspicious piece of mail?**

A. Do not smell, shake or attempt to open the letter or package. Set it aside in a designated area for further evaluation. Contact your supervisor. If you have come in contact with a substance from the suspicious mail, wash your hands with soap and water.

**Q. What do I do if I open a letter or package and get something suspicious on my hands?**

A. Follow these steps:

- Don't panic; remember that most substances received are harmless.
- Do not smell or taste the substance.
- Put the mail down and leave the immediate area.
- Notify your supervisor.
- Wash your hands in soap and water.

**Q. Should I wear a mask to handle or open the mail?**

A. You do not need to wear a mask. Remember that the mail has already traveled many miles in trucks and been handled by others. It is unlikely that the outside of packages would contain anything harmful.

**Q. Should I wear gloves to handle or open the mail?**

A. If you have open cuts or skin lesions on your hands disposable latex gloves may be appropriate.

**Information for Supervisors**

If one of your workers comes to you reporting that they have received or opened a suspicious letter or package do the following:

- Stay calm; remember that your professional and calm behavior will help reassure your staff.
- Make sure the damaged or suspicious package is isolated.
- Make sure that staff leaves the immediate area.
- Make sure anyone who has come into contact with the substance washes his or her hands with soap and water.
- Question the individual briefly to get the main facts - where the article is, what was in it, or why it is suspicious.
- Do not allow anyone to leave the office that might have touched the envelope or package.
- Call your local law enforcement agency and describe the situation.
- Contact your supervisor and on-site security.
- Question the individual again and complete an incident report.
- Contact the on-site security or other designated person for your facility.
- Wait for the authorities to arrive.

**For more information regarding handling mail, see the following websites:**

- FBI website at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov) ⓘ
- U.S. Postal Service website [www.usps.com/aviationsecurity/welcome.htm](http://www.usps.com/aviationsecurity/welcome.htm) ⓘ
- California Highway Patrol Training Video and Fact Sheet: [www.chp.ca.gov](http://www.chp.ca.gov) ⓘ
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.bt.cdc.gov](http://www.bt.cdc.gov) ⓘ