

Minimizing Exposure

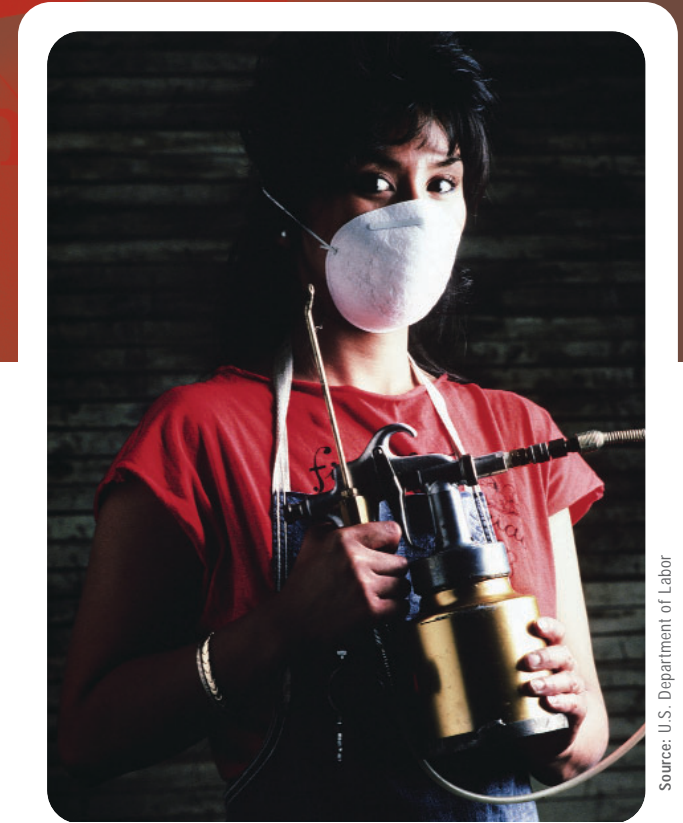
OSHA

Bioterrorism

Protective Equipment

# Brave New World

## Keeping Workers Safe In The Age of Anthrax



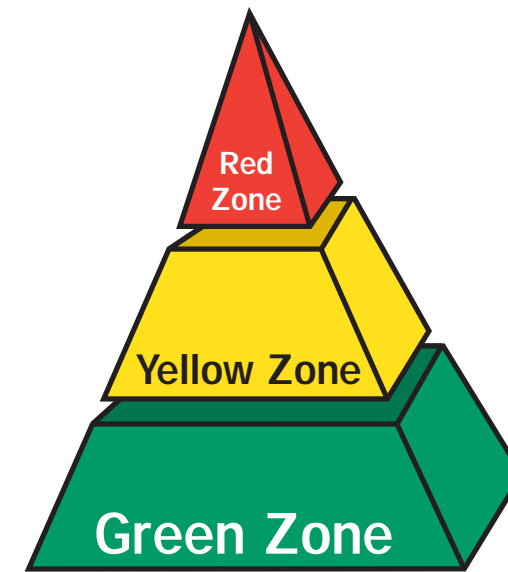
Source: U.S. Department of Labor

Everyone saw the headlines — news that made the chilling prospect of bioterrorism all too real in workplaces across America. As we all know, in October, 2001 four workers died from inhalation anthrax and an additional 13 developed cutaneous or inhalational disease as a result of intentional terrorist activity. In most cases, the disease was linked to unexpected workplace exposure to anthrax spores contained in letters in the mail. Fortunately, the number of workplaces contaminated with the spores has been quite limited. Nevertheless, employers and workers are concerned about possible exposure to bacillus anthracis in the workplace.

In response, the Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) unveiled the “anthrax matrix” to assist employers and employees in dealing with possible workplace exposure to anthrax. The matrix suggests protective measures that OSHA believes reduce the risk of exposure. It is designed to guide employers in assessing risk to their workers, providing appropriate protective equipment, and specifying safe work practices for various risk levels

in the workplace. “Most employers and employees face little or no risk of exposure to anthrax and need only minimal precautions,” said Labor Secretary Elaine L. Chao. “But some may have to deal with potential or known exposures, and we want to make sure they have all the information they need to protect their workers.”

The anthrax matrix (*see graphic*) is a pyramid in three colored sections representing low-, medium-, and high-risk exposure. The **red zone** represents workplaces where authorities have informed workers that contamination with anthrax spores has been confirmed or is strongly suspected. The **yellow zone** represents workplaces where contamination with anthrax spores is possible. The **green zone** denotes workplaces where contamination with anthrax spores is unlikely. The zones are shown in the shape of a pyramid to represent how the risk appears to be distributed. Based on information currently available, contamination with anthrax spores and exposures to the bacterium are unlikely in the vast majority of American workplaces, represented by the green zone.



**Anthrax Matrix**

# Response

Establishing Procedures

Minimizing Exposure

Protective Equipment

OSHA

The matrix is on OSHA's website at [www.osha.gov](http://www.osha.gov) (also on XXI CD). Each section links to useful information and practical guidance to help determine an appropriate response.

Employers should consider the factors listed and use knowledge of their own workplace, together with current information about the anthrax threat from law enforcement organizations and public health departments, to determine the zone that best describes their workplace. After that determination is made, employers are encouraged to click on that zone on the pyramid to see OSHA's recommendations for work practices and precautions that reduce the risk of and/or worker concern about anthrax exposure in the workplace.

**Watch the Mail** As to specific recommendations regarding mailhandling procedures, OSHA advises workers to exercise good judgment and caution when handling mail and adopt the following precautionary measures:

- Be on the lookout for suspicious letters and packages, including packages or envelopes of unusual weight or size, packages or envelopes with a handwritten address and/or no return address, and packages or envelopes with excessive postage;
  - Open packages/envelopes with a minimum amount of movement and always use a letter opener or method that is least likely to disturb the contents;
  - Do not blow into envelopes;
  - Do not shake or pour out the contents;
  - Keep hands away from nose and mouth when opening mail;
  - Turn off fans, portable heaters and other equipment that may create air currents; and
  - Always wash hands after handling mail.
- OSHA also recommends that if employers or employees choose to use protective equipment such as gloves, it is important they take necessary steps to make sure these items are handled and used properly.

"The OSHA information is easy to access and understand," said Secretary Chao. "We are providing needed guidance, not creating new requirements. The world has changed since September 11. Threats to our national security now can clearly involve the workplace."

Information on anthrax and other terrorism threats will be updated as new guidance becomes available. ■