



Workplace  
Safety and Health



## Protecting Workers From Anthrax Infection Response from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health

*The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is the federal agency responsible for conducting research and making recommendations for the prevention of work-related disease and injury. NIOSH is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).*

### Fact Sheet

In October 2001, anthrax attacks through the mail presented a new and deadly health threat to postal workers, government employees, and news media offices.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), a part of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), quickly sent scientists to every location where workers were at risk. NIOSH developed sampling procedures, recommended effective interim protective measures, safeguarded workers who decontaminated affected workplaces, assessed the effectiveness of decontamination, and disseminated information widely. When workers raised concerns about handling irradiated mail, NIOSH again mobilized to help answer their questions.

#### NIOSH Developed and Applied New Sampling Procedures:

- Collaborated with partners to design reliable protocols for collecting samples at postal facilities, Congressional offices, and media offices as part of the initial responses to the anthrax incidents.
- Used sampling technologies in innovative ways. For example, NIOSH adapted a vacuuming technique using an "allergy sock," a method originally developed to measure allergens, to provide a more sensitive, comprehensive way to collect anthrax samples at large postal facilities.

- Provided ready, technical assistance and information on-site to employers, workers, and facility managers in efforts with partner agencies to assess exposures at postal facilities and on Capitol Hill.

#### NIOSH Recommended Personal Protective Equipment and Engineering Controls:

- Worked with other CDC centers, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the U.S. Postal Service, and postal worker unions to develop and disseminate guidelines on engineering controls and personal protective equipment for protecting postal workers and other mail handlers from anthrax exposure.
- Worked with other CDC centers and stakeholders to help develop CDC interim recommendations for fire fighters and other first responders for selection and use of protective clothing and respirators.





### **NIOSH Helped Design and Implement Decontamination Procedures and Post Clean-Up Assessment:**

- Provided technical assistance on workplace sampling procedures and personal protective equipment for decontamination workers to help the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) clean-up of contaminated government buildings.
- Trained FBI, U.S. Coast Guard, independent contractors, and other personnel in appropriate anthrax decontamination procedures.
- Worked with EPA, the Office of the Senate Sergeant at Arms, the U.S. Capitol Police, and others to determine that remediated Congressional buildings were ready for reoccupancy.

### **NIOSH Disseminated Timely Information:**

- Provided daily on-site technical advice and information on worker safety to a labor-management task force of the U.S. Postal Service and postal worker unions.
- Helped develop a widely distributed CDC educational video to protect workers who process, sort, and deliver mail.
- Answered questions by employees in the Hart Senate Office Building after remediation.
- Participated in the CDC command center, working around the clock to respond to requests for help and information from workers, employers, and the general public for more than two-and-a-half months.
- Posted a wide range of documents pertaining to

anthrax and worker health and safety on the NIOSH Web page, providing stakeholders with convenient access to information.

### **NIOSH Responded to Concerns About Irradiated Mail:**

- Evaluated, at the request of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, OPM employees' concerns about symptoms such as nose bleeds, eye irritation, skin rashes, and upper and lower respiratory irritation.
- Responded to a request by the U.S. Postal Service for a health hazard evaluation addressing worker concerns about possible exposure to carbon monoxide from large bags of irradiated mail.
- With the help of an interagency technical team, conducted a health hazard evaluation of workers' concerns about irradiated mail in the U.S. Capitol, Senate, and House offices.
- Provided information to federal and U.S. Postal Service employees in the Washington, D.C. area about irradiated mail and addressed questions from workers.

NIOSH's contributions were integral to the national effort to protect workers from the deadly threat of anthrax-contaminated mail. The lessons learned will strengthen future preparedness.

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**For additional information, contact**

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**or visit the NIOSH Web site at**

**[www.cdc.gov/niosh](http://www.cdc.gov/niosh)**

