



Revised 01/16/08



Suspicious Letter and Package Risk Assessment And Laboratory Sample Submission Guidelines

Emergency responders are critical frontline providers and are urged to exercise sensible risk assessment skills in determining the appropriateness of an item for submission, taking into consideration the overall risk of a particular situation. Federal, state and local response agencies should be mindful of the potential for exposure to potentially harmful substances from suspicious or threatening packages or letters. To optimize the use of law enforcement and laboratory resources, the following guidelines for risk assessment should be used for determining whether to submit a sample of a suspicious item for testing.

Measures can be taken that are the same for suspicious letters and packages and should take into account whether the item is opened, whether it contains a threat, and whether persons in contact with or nearby the package are ill.

PART I: ASSESS THE RISK AND COLLECT THE SAMPLE

1) HIGH RISK, consider submission to state public health laboratory for testing:

- A.** Item is associated with suspicious packages or items that are clearly not a mass mailing or “junk” mail **AND** has a powder or other substance on, leaking from, or in it. “Suspicious” mail can be defined as associated with a terrorist group or with a threatening message or phone call. It might be sent to a high-profile recipient (i.e. government office, political candidate, news reporter, etc.);

OR

- B.** Powder or other substance not associated with the mail, but associated with a verbal or written threat;

OR

- C.** Persons in contact with or nearby the package are exhibiting signs of illness (i.e. burning eyes, vomiting, difficulty breathing, etc.).

Under no circumstances should unprotected or untrained responders attempt to collect specimens from or otherwise disturb the item. The State Emergency Operation Center (SEOC), local FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) field office and HAZMAT unit must be notified immediately. Under the direction of a law enforcement representative, a HAZMAT technician, in a minimum of Level-B equipment, will perform field screening and collect and turn the sample over to law enforcement for delivery to the closest Tennessee Department of Health Laboratory for testing. There are laboratories that service the western, middle and eastern divisions of the state. The field safety screening process shall be clearly documented and include but not be limited to screening for pH, explosives, radioactivity, and if possible, volatile organic compounds, flammable materials, and oxidizing agents. If qualified HAZMAT technicians are not available in your vicinity, the SEOC must be called to coordinate external support.

It is **required** that samples submitted be collected with the Biological Sampling Kit provided by the Tennessee Department of Health Laboratory. Items not submitted according these guidelines will NOT be accepted for testing.

The State defines sample as – a small portion of the suspicious material. **Do not send all the evidence to the laboratory** for testing, just a sample. The Tennessee Department of Health Laboratory does not investigate crimes, it only tests samples and provides results to law enforcement and public health officials. Therefore, local, state or federal law enforcement must retain control of any potential evidence.

2) UNCERTAIN RISK, requires further risk assessment:

A. Item associated with suspicious mail without an articulated threat and in the absence of a powder or other substance.

OR

B. Item with unknown powder or substance, no articulated threat and no illness.

Responders should consult with law enforcement to evaluate the context in which the substance or letter was discovered or received and make a determination as to whether that item poses a credible threat. Examples might include hate mail, protest letters sent to an abortion clinic, etc.

3) LOW RISK, does not need laboratory testing but requires disposal: Items not in categories 1 or 2 as described above. Responders are asked to decline accepting items for submission and provide advice on proper disposal in regular trash. Law enforcement or regional or metropolitan health departments can be consulted for questions. Examples include items that might be expected to have powder already associated with them (i.e. bubble gum, potato chips, donuts, pills, magazines, etc.), powders found in an area where the public is not in immediate danger (i.e. by the roadside), and other isolated powders or items found in the absence of an overt threat or other suspicious circumstances.

PART II: SUBMIT THE SAMPLE

All samples submitted for testing at the Tennessee Department of Health Laboratory must be submitted by law enforcement and **must fit into the Biological Sampling Kit provided by the Tennessee Department of Health Laboratory**. Larger items will not be accepted by the Laboratory because they cannot be safely handled in their Biological Safety Cabinets. Agencies will be furnished with a new Biological Sampling Kit as used or when contents are expired. Standard FBI notification and chain-of-custody procedures shall continue to be followed as prescribed. **The State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) must be notified upon the decision to submit a specimen for testing.**

CONTACT INFORMATION

State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC)	(615) 741-0001 or (800) 262-3400
FBI Joint Terrorism Task Force: - Knoxville	(865) 544-0751
- Nashville	(615) 232-7500
- Memphis	(901) 747-4300
Governor's Office of Homeland Security	(615) 532-7825
Tennessee Department of Health – Laboratory	(615) 262-6300
Tennessee Department of Health – Central Office	(615) 741-7247

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