

 Eadmeánraic na Seirbhíse Sláinte Health Service Executive	<h1 style="margin: 0;">Safety Advisory/ Guidance Note</h1>				
<b>Ref: SAGN:005:02</b>	<b>RE: Suspicious Packages – Biological /Chemical threats by post</b>				
<b>Issue date:</b>	April 2016	<b>Revised Date:</b>	October 2020	<b>Review date:</b>	October 2022
<b>Author(s):</b>	NH&SF – Information & Advisory Team.				
<b>Note:</b>	<i>The information provided is for general guidance only, should you require more specific advice please contact the Health &amp; Safety Help Desk. The management of any occupational safety and health issue(s) remains the responsibility of local management.</i>				

## 1 Background:

Terrorist/criminal incidents that involve the posting of biological agents/chemicals are extremely rare. However, it is essential for the safety, health and welfare of all our employees and others that procedures are in place to deal with a situation where there is a concern that a suspect biological/chemical package has been received. Employees should be aware of their role in any emergency procedures and the steps necessary to minimise the risk of exposure and the possibility of harm.

Where employees handle incoming mail it is strongly recommended that the risk of receiving a suspicious package (however small this may seem to be) is considered by managers (and subject to the formal risk assessment process). Further detail on the risk assessment process is provided below.

Emergency and contingency plans should then be drawn-up and implemented and their adequacy subject to periodic review. Further tips and guidelines on potential content are given later in this SAGN. Drills should also be undertaken regularly, followed by a review of the procedure to ensure that if an incident does occur employees know what to do and remain calm.

As part of any emergency procedures, a system must be in place to quickly trace a suspect letter or parcel through the mail handling system both internally and externally. This will assist in the identification of any employee (and potentially others) who may have been exposed to a risk to their health and safety from the handling of the suspect item and ensure that appropriate treatment is received in a timely manner.

## 2 Risk Assessment:

Employees should be involved in the risk assessment process and provided with relevant information on the risks and the necessary control measures.

Based on risk assessment the hierarchy of control measures you may need to consider includes:

- Prevention of exposure (e.g. restricting the numbers of employees handling the mail)
- Engineering controls (e.g. fume hoods with filters and air extraction systems)

- Good housekeeping measures (e.g. appropriate filters on vacuum cleaners and other cleaning devices) and
- The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) (e.g. masks or gloves)

PPE should only be considered if the risk assessment indicates that it is appropriate after all other controls have been implemented. It is important that only equipment that is suitable for the task being performed as well as for the risk being considered is provided. For further information please refer to webpage on [PPE](#).

### **3 Emergency Procedures – Tips/Guidelines:**

This section provides general tips and guidelines which may be considered when developing appropriate local emergency procedures around the receipt and handling of suspicious packages, these lists should be considered as non-exhaustive.

#### **3.1 General Mail Handling Safety Tips:**

- Open all mail with a letter opener or other method that is least likely to disturb contents
- Open packages/envelopes with a minimum amount of movement
- Do not blow into envelopes
- Do not shake or pour out contents
- Keep hands away from nose and mouth while opening mail
- Wash hands after handling mail

#### **What to look for:**

Some items that *may* trigger suspicion are:

- Discolouration, crystals on surface, strange odours or oily stains
- Envelope with powder or powder-like residue
- Excessive tape or string
- Unusual size or weight given size
- Lopsided or oddly-shaped envelope
- Postmark that does not match return address
- Restrictive endorsements such as "Personal"
- Excessive postage
- Block-printed or poorly-typed addresses
- Incorrect titles
- Title but no name
- Misspellings of common words
- No return address
- Addressed to individual no longer with the organisation

If you are in any doubt about a package, do not:

- Touch it
- Move it
- Open it

Do call the Gardaí on 999 or 112

If the package is opened and you believe that exposure has occurred:

- Remain calm

- Do not touch eyes, nose or any other part of the body
- Wash your hands in ordinary soap where facilities are provided
- Staff movement outside contained locations should be avoided as much as possible
- Shut windows and doors in the room and leave the room, keep anyone who may have been exposed separate from others and available for medical examination as appropriate
- Switch off any room air conditioning system
- Notify your manager

(If your manager does not occupy the same building a suitably nominated person must be informed)  
Your manager or nominated person should:

- Notify Gardaí immediately if not already done
- Arrange for the switching off the building air conditioning system (note: management, emergency responders, emergency response team and/or key persons/advisors as appropriate must make a decision on the containment area in case of larger facilities)
- Close all fire doors in the building (note as above)
- Close all windows in the rest of the building (note as above)
- Move people away from the hazard and await instructions from the emergency services

Ensure all employees comply with any guidance given by the emergency services. If you find a suspect package outside a building:

- Do not touch it or move it
- Inform your manager or nominated person clearly stating why you believe it to be a suspicious package
- Await further instructions

For further information on procedures please refer to your local policies/guidelines or contact the



Please log your health & safety request at:  
<https://healthservice.hse.ie/staff/benefits-services/health-and-safety/health-and-safety-helpdesk.html> or go to:

<http://pndchssdweb02.healthirl.net/Health.WebAccess/ss>

Alternatively contact the National Health & Safety Helpdesk on 1850 420 420

#### Legislation:

- Safety Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005
- The Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Biological Agents) Regulations 2013
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Chemical Agents) Regulations 2001

#### References/Additional Guidance:

[www.emergencyplanning.ie/en/search/node?keys=suspicious%20packages](http://www.emergencyplanning.ie/en/search/node?keys=suspicious%20packages)

[www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)