



GSA Advisory on Irradiated Mail

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Updated GSA Advisory on Irradiated Mail

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The United States Postal Service (USPS) is continuing to irradiate first class business and letter-size envelopes addressed to federal offices with ZIP Codes from 20200 through 20599. The GSA Office of Governmentwide Policy, in conjunction with USPS, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, and the GSA Federal Protective Service, is updating its earlier advisory for federal mail handlers to reflect the latest available information.

When the main Washington, DC Post Office at Brentwood was closed due to anthrax contamination in October 2001, the USPS arranged to process mail in several other plants. Since then, select items addressed to ZIP Codes from 20200 through 20599 have been irradiated to kill any biological agent, including anthrax, that may be contained in the mail. This has added five or more days to delivery time for mail addressed to those ZIP Codes.

How long is it taking to irradiate the mail?

Items needing irradiation take about 8 days from mailing to delivery. This allows:

- 2+ days for items to arrive in Washington, DC,
 - 1 day for USPS to ship items to an irradiation facility outside of Washington,
 - 1 day to irradiate,
 - 1 day to get back to Washington, DC,
 - 2-3 days to unpack, air out, and spray the irradiated items to remove/suppress any odor, and deliver.
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- additional time should be added for agencies to process and deliver the mail internally.

How does the irradiation process affect the mail?

First, irradiated mail does not contain any residual radiation or radioactivity. Possible effects of the irradiation process include such things as discolored, brittle pages that may be stuck together. In addition, irradiated mail that contains plastic, such as a credit card, a plastic window on the envelope, an item wrapped in plastic, or carbonless paper, occasionally gives off non-lethal chemical by-products, which may not smell very good. USPS is treating this problem by “airing the mail out” for one to three days and spraying it with an odor-remover before delivering it.

What are the effects on employees?

In most cases, these by-products will have no effect on employees. A small number of federal employees within the Washington, DC, metropolitan area have experienced problems. The majority of these problems have shown themselves as a minor skin rash that disappears within a few days. A small number of federal employees have also experienced respiratory problems from working with irradiated mail. Allegedly, persons with asthma or other pre-existing respiratory problems are particularly sensitive.

GSA recommends that mail center managers keep a complaint log, with the name, date, time, circumstances, and nature of the complaint, to help determine if there is a common thread among employee related health complaints.

What are some things I can do to minimize the side effects?

The following steps may help minimize problems:

- If you have sensitive skin, you may wear gloves when opening mail.
- Use non-latex powder free gloves to reduce the potential for hand irritation.
- Use a moisturizer after washing your hands each time to help reduce dryness and irritation during the winter months.
- Do not enclose the mail in a box or drawer, since this may contain vapors given off by the mail within the box and make the problem worse.
- Spread out the mail so it can “air out” and minimize the effects of any by-products that might still exist.
- Handle the mail in areas where there is a good airflow.
- Ask someone else to open your mail if you feel you are particularly vulnerable.

For more information, call the GSA Mail Communications Policy Office at 202-208-7663.