Australian Government
Australian Customs Service

INSTRUCTIONS AND GUIDELINES

Title: OHS Hazard Instruction and Guideline – Biological Hazards
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This Instruction and Guideline refers to:
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Subject:	OHS Hazard Guideline – Biological Hazards
Purpose:	To provide advice on managing biological hazard risks in the workplace
Owner:	National Director, People and Place Division
Category:	People

The electronic version published on the intranet is the current Practice Statement.

Summary of Main Points

This OHS Hazard Instruction and Guideline provides additional guidance in implementing the OHS Risk Management Practice Statement when managing risks associated with biological hazards. This Instruction and Guideline outlines:

- Practical steps and tips that can be taken to manage biological hazard risks and to develop local Standard Operating Procedures; and
- Additional references.

Introduction

The intended policy outcomes of this document are to ensure that Customs meets its legislative obligations and duty of care to successfully manage biological hazard risks in the workplace and ensure a safe and healthy work environment.

This Instruction and Guideline outlines the legislative requirements on Customs and its employees to manage risks associated with potential exposure to biological hazards as a result of an accident or deliberate action. It describes biological hazards and provides advice and suggestions on how to conduct OHS Risk Assessments for them. It does not include specific procedures, as these will need to be developed locally in consideration of individual factors within each workplace. The *OHS Hazard Instruction and Guideline - Communicable Diseases* provides advice and information on more usual or regular biological hazards in the workplace.

Instructions and Guidelines

Biological agents are bacteria, viruses or biological toxins either released by accident, or deliberately spread to cause injury or death. This document recognises that:

- While the threat of the deliberate use of biological material is unlikely, this threat is more likely to increase than decrease (given the recent increase in terrorist activities and hoax incidents);
- The consequences of a deliberate biological incident are likely to be very serious, if not life-threatening;
- Technological advances in testing and detection equipment are likely to better identify biological hazards; and
- All staff should be aware of potential hazards and what to do during a biological incident.

The following information is provided to assist work areas conduct OHS risk assessment management processes for biological hazards and to formulate SOPs.

Identify the Hazard

Many biological agents are non-volatile and invisible to our senses and therefore very difficult to identify. Biological agents include:

- **Bacteria**: Anthrax, Plague;
- **Virus**: Smallpox, Viral Haemorrhagic Fever;
- **Toxin**: Ricin, Botulin.

There are other hazards that are common in different regions overseas but unknown or little known here in Australia, mainly because of our continued vigilance. These include rabies, foot and mouth disease and temporary pandemics such as the acute respiratory syndrome illness SARS and the Asian bird flu.

Some biological hazards are infectious and pass from person to person. If biological agents are released without any warning, the first signs of a release may be some time after the event, when affected individuals report symptoms. Most biological warfare agents are typically designed for aerosol (airborne) dispersion.

Situations where Customs staff may encounter potential biological hazards include:

- Testing and examining shipping containers;
- Undertaking ship searches;
- Examining international cargo;
- Examining and processing postal items;
- Searching or handling passenger baggage; and
- Wharf patrol and counter terrorist activities.

Pay particular attention to containers sealed in an unusually thorough way, or those seemingly designed to leak their contents. Again, if suspicions are raised, identify the container owner and do not open it.

Assess the Risk

Potential biological incidents are a serious threat to employees, customers, assets, operations and facilities. They are normally swallowed or inhaled rather than absorbed through skin. The effects vary depending on the agent and they are usually delayed, ranging from hours to days or weeks.

Most biological incidents are likely to have some common characteristics:

- They are likely to be one-off or isolated events;
- The likelihood of accidents or illness resulting from the incident will vary but the potential consequences are usually fairly serious; and
- They are likely to fall into the high-risk category because of their potential consequences.

It is therefore important that this risk assessment process is conducted speedily and decisively and a move to control the risk/s is made as soon as practicable.

Control the Risk

It will be difficult to eliminate most biological hazards once they have been identified, so staff need to react quickly and implement control measures that minimise or negate the risk to themselves and others. The most common control methods are likely to involve:

- Modifying the hazard – neutralising or reducing the risk associated with the hazard;
- Isolating the hazard – by covering it or evacuating people from around the hazard;
- Using personal protective equipment (PPE) – to minimise exposure.

Control measures should only be undertaken where there is no chance of increasing the risks associated with the hazard. **If in doubt, under no circumstances touch, tamper with, or move the biological hazard.**

In this event, immediately evacuate the area and follow local evacuation and/or emergency procedures. This is likely to include contacting the Customs (or building) Chief Warden (or deputy) and/or Police (Ring 000) and following their further instructions.

Given their form and our inability to sense many biological hazards, you may not be aware that you have been exposed. If you are at a site where emergency services advise there has been a deliberate release of a biological agent, comply with their directions. You may need to be decontaminated to remove any agent from your clothing and skin. Emergency services and health authorities will assess and manage the risks for anyone who has potentially been exposed to a biological agent. Health authorities may recommend treatment with antibiotics if you have been exposed. Pay close attention to all official health instructions.
If you do suspect that you have been exposed to a package or device containing a biological agent:

- Do not disturb the package any further. Do not pass it around. Do not try to clean up the powder or liquid, or brush off your clothing;
- If possible, place an object over the package such as a large waste bin without disturbing it;
- Stay in your office or immediate work area. This also applies to co-workers in the same room. Prevent others from entering the area and becoming contaminated. Remember you are not in immediate danger;
- Keep your hands away from your face to avoid contaminating your eyes, nose and mouth;
- If possible (without leaving your workspace) wash your hands;
- If possible have the building ventilation system shut down and turn off any fans; or equipment that is circulating air around your workplace; and
- **Follow emergency procedures**

Use the following emergency procedure for every Biological incident. The actual order for each step depends on the nature and seriousness of the hazard or incident, and any established emergency procedures in place at the location.

- Remain calm;
- Survey the scene and **ensure your immediate safety** and then of others (if possible without harm to you);
- Call for help or get someone else to call for help. Depending on the circumstances this will be to 000 (Fire Brigade, Police and/or Ambulance) and/or the Customs or building Chief Warden (or deputy) and/or an appropriate First Aid officer. You should advise that:
    - There has been a biological incident; and
    - (if applicable) you and/or others have been exposed and/or injured

Also describe:

- The incident or device, including any action taken;
- The exact location of the incident or device such as the street address and building information;
- the likely number of victims or people exposed;
- any symptoms or obvious injuries;
- wind direction (the direction the wind is coming from, if known) for biological incidents

- Apply appropriate First Aid if safe to do so.

It is also important that appropriate medical advice is sought following injury and actual or possible exposure to biological materials. Given that in many instances there may be no obvious symptoms or signs of exposure, it is important that appropriate testing and management strategies are put into place. This will help minimise, or negate, any injury or illness.

Monitor and Review

It is important to give results of any testing or incident investigation to those involved as soon as possible after a possible biological exposure. It is also important that staff get continuing information about any investigation processes, so that they are kept fully informed of progress and outcomes affecting them.

Questions that could be asked during the review of a biological incident are:

- What were the outcomes from the incident?
- Are any modifications or changes needed to ameliorate a similar incident? This might entail reviewing existing guidelines and policies, Standard Operating Procedures, work systems or processes or emergency procedures.
- Is there a need to undertake awareness or training sessions?
- Is there a need to conduct more regular reviews of current processes?

The lessons learnt from review processes are important and should be documented and incorporated into SOPs or guidelines as appropriate.

Related Policies and references

Practice Statements

- *Customs OHS Policy – OHS Risk Management – HSMA 2*
- *OHS Policy Guideline - Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)*
- *OHS Policy Guideline - First Aid*

Other Instructions and Guidelines

- *Customs OHS Hazard Instructions and Guidelines*
    - *Hazardous Substances*
    - *Communicable Diseases*
    - *Explosive Material and Devices*

Other Legislation and References

- *Generic Workplace Hazard Checklist*
- *Customs Counter Terrorism Plan*
- *Customs Security Handbook*

- Building Emergency Procedures – for each building location

Key roles and responsibilities
The Policy Owner for this Practice Statement is: National Director, People and Place.

Consultation

Industry Engagement
Not applicable

Internal Consultation
All staff have been consulted in the development of this document as part of the development of Customs Health and Safety Management Arrangements in accordance with the OHS Act 1991. The National OHS Committee has endorsed the document for use within Customs.

Approval

Approved on (__/__2007) by:
Ian Grey
National Director People and Place