



Environmental Health & Safety

Guidance for Handling Incoming Mail During COVID-19 Concerns

Overview

Staff who open mail that arrives from various locations have inquired about the safety of handling this in a routine way, during the period of time that there are concerns about transmission of COVID-19. This guidance document utilizes information available from approved government and peer-reviewed medical journal sources.

Overall Risk

Opening mail is a low-risk activity. The United States Postal Service guidance on this point¹ with input from the World Health Organization and CDC, specifies that there is no appreciable risk to persons who handle mail, due to the length of time that it is in the system prior to delivery, and the various conditions encountered during sorting and delivery. In addition, EH&S has found no evidence from official sources that COVID-19 is being spread through the mail. As for encounters with other environmental surfaces, those who receive, open and handle mail can treat this similarly, washing hands after handling and before touching eyes, nose and mouth.

Survivability on Environmental Surfaces

The SARS CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19, has been studied to help understand how long this organism survives on various environmental surfaces in test situations. A recent study reported in the new England Journal of Medicine² found that the mean time for viability of Sars CoV-2 on cardboard surfaces was 24 hours. Given that there is at least one day within the mail system that mail travels and resides, and there is an additional period of time for the mail to be sorted and delivered to its destination, this information supports the position of the USPS and the other agencies noted.

Safety Procedures

Those who receive mail for further distribution to subsequent addresses, may experience materials residing for the shortest time within the mail system. These workers can consider the use of nitrile gloves when handling the mail. If this strategy is employed, mail handlers should be trained not to touch eyes, nose or mouth with gloved hands, and should also be trained in proper donning and doffing technique³, followed by the performance of adequate hand hygiene. This involves washing hands with warm water and soap for at least 20 seconds, followed by rinsing and drying with a clean paper towel. Doffed gloves and used paper towels should be properly disposed of in an appropriate waste container. When hand washing facilities are not available, the use of hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol should be used,⁴ with other studies supporting the use of hand sanitizer with at least 70 % alcohol as an ingredient.⁵

¹ <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/statements/usps-statement-on-coronavirus.htm>

² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/pdf/10.1056/NEJMc2004973?articleTools=true>

³ <https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/pdf/poster-how-to-remove-gloves.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.cdc.gov/handwashing/show-me-the-science-hand-sanitizer.html#sixteen>

⁵ <https://cmr.asm.org/content/17/4/863.long>