



DEADLY POISON DISCOVERED IN U.S. SENATE OFFICE

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In an incident reminiscent of the deadly anthrax scare that killed five people in the fall of 2001, police at a Senate office building in Washington, D.C., Monday discovered traces of a poisonous substance called ricin.

The powder was found on a mail machine in the office of Republican U.S. Sen. Bill Frist of Tennessee.

“Somebody in all likelihood manufactured this with intent to harm,” Frist said Tuesday. “This is a criminal investigation and will be investigated as such.”

Three Senate office buildings – the Hart, Dirksen and Russell – were closed Tuesday, and Capital police advised all lawmakers and staffers on Capitol Hill not to open any mail. Several members of Frist's staff were put through decontamination procedures (basically thorough showers), but health officials said the poison did not seem to have done any harm.

“As each minute ticks by, we are less and less concerned about the health effects,” Dr. Julie Gerberding, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director, said. If the ricin were pure, she said, “we would expect very early onset. The fact that we haven't seen that is reassuring.”

What is Ricin?

Ricin is a chemical produced by the castor plant, a plant grown around the world. When a castor bean is mashed and processed, the water extracted can contain the molecule ricin which, when found in humans or animals, can cripple them by killing off cells.

“When enough cells die, it can cause damage and eventually enough damage could kill an infected person or an exposed person,” said Julie Fischer, a researcher at the Henry L. Stimson Center, a nonprofit national and international security research center in Washington, D.C.

According to Fischer, ricin is not as dangerous as anthrax. Anthrax is a live spore of bacteria that can infect someone who simply touches it. Ricin is a toxin that has to be inhaled or eaten. It also takes a larger amount of ricin than anthrax to kill someone.

“Not that there's a good thing about finding ricin in your office and it's clearly a threat that has to be taken seriously but it is a much less dangerous toxin,” Fischer said.

Fischer said symptoms generally occur within four to 24 hours of exposure. To date, no antidote, or vaccine, exists for ricin. Treatment includes trying to flush the body of the toxin as quickly as possible.

An Ongoing Investigation

As of Wednesday, hazardous materials inspectors from the FBI and from the Capital police were searching for evidence of more ricin and examining incoming mail. The FBI will perform forensic analyses on all suspicious mail, checking it at their lab in Quantico, Va., for evidence such as fingerprints, hairs and fibers.

Also Tuesday, authorities revealed that a ricin-tainted envelope was intercepted in November at a facility that processes mail for the White House. Another was found at a postal facility in South Carolina in October. Both envelopes contained letters signed by “Fallen Angel” and included statements complaining about recent regulations that require truck drivers to rest before lengthy journeys.

If caught, the person who sent the ricin to Frist’s office could face charges of possession, transfer, production and transport of a weapon of mass destruction.

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