

RICIN

Polk County Preparations

Because of ongoing concerns about potential terrorist attacks, the U.S. government is working to improve overall preparation against terrorism. One aspect of this preparation is to learn more about protecting ourselves against possible attacks with biological agents.

If a public health emergency happens in our community, the Polk County Public Health Department will be the local agency responsible for preparing and guiding medical response and public information efforts. During such an emergency, a critical role of the Public Health Department will be to work with other local first responders, such as fire and police. The Public Health Department will also coordinate response activities with state and federal agencies.

The Polk County Public Health Department is providing this information to help you understand what ricin is and what response you may be asked to take in the event that you were exposed to ricin.

What is Ricin?

Ricin is a powerful poison that occurs naturally within the beans of the castor plant. These plants are found throughout the world. People can be exposed to ricin in three major ways: you can breathe it into your lungs (inhalation); or you can swallow it (ingestion) or you can be injected with it.

Ricin and Terrorism

Ricin has been considered as a possible weapon of war since it can be easily produced and may be used in a biological attack. Ricin can be made into an aerosol or spray that could be spread through the air. In this form, ricin is usually invisible. Ricin can also be made as a powder or pellets that could be used to contaminate food or water. Ricin pellets can also be injected or used as projectile weapons.

In the event of a terrorist attack with ricin, the Public Health Department and emergency officials will provide emergency information and instructions on how to protect yourself and your family. You may be asked to evacuate (leave the area) or shelter-in-place (remain inside a building). In either case, it is important that you and your family have an Emergency Preparation Plan.

Specially designed masks with appropriate filters for chemical and biological agents may provide protection from ricin. However, dust and pollen masks WILL NOT provide protection.

Symptoms of Exposure to Ricin

If you inhaled ricin, you would experience severe breathing difficulties within a few hours. These symptoms would be similar to pneumonia, along with weakness, fever and cough. If you swallowed or were injected with ricin, you would have severe flu-like symptoms including high fever and possible seizures, vomiting, diarrhea, and dangerous dehydration. In either case, exposure to ricin can be fatal within 36 to 72 hours if left untreated. If you were exposed to ricin through inhalation, swallowing or injection, you are NOT contagious. Ricin cannot be spread from person-to-person.

Treatment for Exposure to Ricin

If you were exposed to ricin, you would be provided supportive medical care to relieve symptoms. Fluids would be replaced, fever and other symptoms would be treated. If you are treated quickly, your survival rate is high. There is no vaccine to prevent ricin poisoning.

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If You Were Exposed to Ricin:

- **Move away from the source.** First, get fresh air by leaving the area where the ricin was released. Moving to an area with fresh air can save your life. If the ricin release was outside, move away from the area where the ricin was released. If the ricin release was indoors, get out of the building. If you can't leave the area that was exposed to ricin, stay as low to the ground as possible.
- **Quickly remove clothing.** If possible, cut clothing off the body instead of pulling it over the head since ricin may get onto uncontaminated skin. Avoid touching the contaminated clothing. If you are helping other people remove their clothing, use gloves to assist them.
- **Place your clothing, contact lenses, shoes, etc. inside a plastic bag.** If you can, wear rubber gloves and use tongs, tool handles, sticks or turn the bag inside out, and pick up the clothes. Seal the bag and place it inside another plastic bag. This will help protect you and other people from the ricin that might be on the items.
- **As quickly as possible, immediately wash any ricin from your skin** with large amounts of regular soap and water.
- **If your eyes are burning or your vision is blurred, rinse your eyes with plain water** for 10 to 15 minutes. If you wear contacts, remove them and dispose of them with the contaminated clothing. If eyeglasses or jewelry were exposed to ricin, wash them with soap and water. You can put them back on after washing.
- **When the emergency personnel arrive,** tell them what you did with your clothes and other items. The emergency personnel will arrange for further disposal. Do not handle the plastic bags yourself.
- **If ricin has been swallowed,** do not induce vomiting, do not give fluids to drink.
- **Seek medical attention right away.** Stay calm. Dial 911 and explain what has happened.

If you have any questions about ricin, please contact the **Polk County Health Department at 515-286-3798**. Public Health Department staff members are available to answer your questions Monday to Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For information about putting together an Emergency Preparation Plan, visit the Department of Homeland Security site at www.ready.gov. Also, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at www.bt.cdc.gov for additional information.

