Nuclear agency inspecting Maryland lab after contamination

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The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has begun a special inspection at a facility in suburban Maryland following a worker's potential exposure to radioactive contamination.

A five-member NRC team began the inspection Tuesday after an incident last month when a glass ampule containing americium-241 —a radioactive substance—broke in a National Institute of Standards and Technology laboratory used to prepare radioactive samples.

Test results indicated the employee potentially received a dose of radiation above NRC annual occupational limits. Additional testing is being done on the worker to determine the actual dose. The results will be included in a report to be issued within 45 days after the review is completed.

The NRC team is reviewing the circumstances surrounding the event as well as NIST's corrective actions.

Neil Sheehan, a spokesman for the NRC, said the occupational radioactive exposure estimated for the worker would not be expected to result in any immediate health effects. He said in an email that the exposure "marginally increases" the person's risk of developing cancer some time during his lifetime. He said further testing should clarify the estimated increased risk.

Jennifer Huergo, a spokeswoman for NIST, said the employee was

treated at a hospital and released. She said the worker "received appropriate medical attention" based on guidance from specialists in radiation exposure care.