



Chemicals

You work with chemicals in your job every day. Do you know the names of the chemicals without looking at the labels? Do you know how to handle and store them safely without risking potentially dangerous exposure to them? What would happen to you if you were overexposed to these chemicals?

Any worker who doesn't know the answers to these questions is at risk of serious harm. That's why the hazard communication standard-also known as the "right-to-know" law-was established by OSHA. It requires employers to provide their employees with detailed information and training on the chemicals they work with.

The information is provided to you in three ways: (1) labels on the containers of chemicals, (2) a safety data sheet (SDS) for each chemical in use at the worksite-maintained in an easily accessible location, and (3) extensive training sessions on the chemicals you use on your job and how to protect yourself from being harmed by them.

Always read the label on the container of a hazardous chemical. It can provide you with a lot of very useful information, such as the name of the chemical you are using and any warnings describing its dangerous properties-for example, Warning - Highly Flammable! It may also provide handling and storage information, precautions for using the chemical (e.g., "use only in a ventilated area") and first-aid information on what to do if you are exposed to the chemical.

The safety data sheets contain more detailed information than the labels. You should make yourself familiar with this information before you begin working with the chemicals. You can also refer to the sheets if there is a problem, such as a leakage or spill.

These SDS's can be written in a highly technical language. It is therefore important to understand some of the terminology that is used.

Acute or chronic effects: A chemical that is acutely toxic can injure you after a single exposure, while other chemicals will harm you after repeated or prolonged use.

Route of entry: How a chemical gets into your body-through inhaling, swallowing, skin absorption, etc. The route of entry will determine what personal protective equipment you should use when handling the substance.

Local or systemic reaction: When you are exposed to a toxic chemical, you can experience one or both of these reactions. A local reaction will occur at the site of the exposure, such as irritations or damage to the skin, eyes, or lungs. When chemicals enter the bloodstream through the skin, eyes, mouth, or lungs, your entire body can be damaged. This is known as a systemic reaction. The damage can be immediate or delayed.

Target organs: Organs in your body that are damaged by a systemic reaction to a hazardous chemical, such as the liver, heart, kidneys, and others.

Permissible exposure limit (PEL): This measurement will tell you the average amount of a chemical that you can safely be exposed to over an 8-hour period.



Compatibility: Toward the bottom of every SDS is a section that describes what chemicals the material should not be mixed with. For example, chlorine bleach mixed with ammonia can cause an extremely toxic gas. If you have any questions about the chemical terminology, check with your supervisor.

Make sure you have completed all the necessary training on the specific chemicals in your workplace. Know all the emergency procedures that should be used in case of an accidental spill or exposure.

Important point: If you don't know, ask! Never start a job without knowing the properties and hazards of the chemical(s) you're working with.

The following general precautions should be used around all chemicals:

Never eat, drink, or smoke around chemicals in the work area.. Keep flammable and explosive material away from any heat sources.. Make sure there is enough ventilation in the work area. If you feel the slightest amount of dizziness or nausea, report the incident immediately to your supervisor.

Use the proper personal protective equipment. This may include gloves, safety glasses, masks, respirators, and work clothes depending on the type of chemicals you are using. Keep all equipment clean and report any damage.

Know how to properly dispose of all contaminated materials..

Always use established procedures for handling, storing, or transporting hazardous chemicals.

As you can see, the "right-to-know" regulation provides you with a lot of information. It's up to you to seek out that information and use it for your own protection.

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