Chemicals: Common but Deadly



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Safety Talk

They look harmless, but many common chemicals used or stored in the workplace are potentially deadly substances that must be treated with extreme care and respect.

Chemicals, even ordinary cleaning solutions, pose a risk to all workers. Chemicals can be inhaled, absorbed through the skin or eyes, swallowed or ingested through objects that have been contaminated, such as cigarettes. Some chemicals can severely burn the skin, eyes and internal systems. And some chemicals, when they enter the body, spread quickly through the bloodstream, attacking organs as they go. As well, chemicals are often explosive, corrosive or flammable.

Get to know the chemicals in your workplace by reviewing the material safety data sheet (MSDS) for each chemical you work with or around. The MSDS lists the chemical’s properties and hazards, suggests ways you can protect yourself and provides instructions for proper storage and disposal. Know where chemicals are stored, read the product labels and learn the symbols that identify a chemical’s hazards.

You should also do a trial run of emergency procedures, including finding and using emergency equipment. Locate the nearest safety showers and eyewash stations and practice finding them with your eyes closed. This may sound strange, but the practice will be worth it if you’re ever blinded by a chemical splash.

If a chemical does get in your eyes, rinse at the eyewash station for at least 20 minutes and get medical help. If a chemical splashes your body, rinse in a safety shower or other clean water source for at least 20 minutes.

To reduce your risks:

- Learn from the MSDS how to protect yourself and others in case of exposure.
- Wear the personal protective equipment (PPE) recommended by the MSDS. This may include eye and face protection, gloves made of specific materials, boots, aprons and respiratory equipment.
- Make sure the respiratory equipment works and fits you properly.
- Know where the nearest fire extinguisher is and know how to use it.
- Know emergency procedures in case of an accident, spill or exposure, including which emergency numbers to call and which alarms to pull.
- Know the location of absorbent materials to contain a spill. Ensure the material is right for the chemical you work with and that you’re properly trained to use it.

Workplace chemicals can cause serious injury and death, so learn how to protect yourself.