Know Your Chemicals



Safety Talk

Hazardous chemicals in the workplace are deadly. Your safety depends on special training and knowledge.

Chemicals enter the body in a number of different ways. A chemical can be absorbed by the skin, inhaled, ingested or through a puncture like a needle.

Once in the body, chemicals are circulated by blood. Common chemical injuries include: burns, skin irritation, nausea, organ damage, and heart ailments.

Death or injury from chemical exposure doesn’t always happen right away. It can take days, weeks, years, or even decades before illness develops. Dioxin, for example, was widely used until the mid-1980s. Today, workers who were once involved in its manufacturing report a 60 per cent higher than normal rate of cancer.

The amount of injury a hazardous chemical will cause is a product of two important factors: the chemical’s toxicity and the length of time you are exposed to it. But make no mistake, even a small exposure to a highly toxic chemical can eventually kill you.

So, the first rule is, if you are not trained in the proper use of a hazardous chemical, do not use it, pick it up, smell it, touch it, or taste it. The second rule is, if you see a liquid spill, consider it toxic until you know for sure that it isn’t.

Knowing about the chemicals to which you are exposed is not only your right but your responsibility as well.

Every hazardous chemical in your workplace has a Safety Data Sheet (SDS) which lists all the important information about the chemical compound. Hazardous ingredients, fire and explosion data, reaction qualities, health hazards such as how the chemical enters the body, first aid procedures, how to safely clean up spills, required personal protective equipment, and special handling procedures are all required reading before handling hazardous chemicals. If you use a material frequently on the job you should be familiar with its SDS. Observe all listed precautions to avoid exposure.

But if a material is seldom used in a workplace, extra care must be taken to identify hazards. If you work with or around hazardous chemicals and any of this sounds new to you, then you should talk to your supervisor about retraining.

If you are the least bit unsure about the health hazards associated with the chemicals with which you work or those that are present in your work area, talk to your supervisor.

Learn all you can about the chemicals you work with. It’s your right and responsibility. A responsibility you should take very seriously.