Post-Pandemic Compliance: Hand Tool Hygiene & Infection Prevention



Hand me that hammer, would'ya?

A request that sounds so normal should be enough to send shivers down your spine in the post-pandemic workplace.

What the Law Requires

OHS laws require you to take reasonable measures to protect the health and safety of your workers and prevent known hazards. And at this moment in time, no hazard is better known or more dreaded than COVID-19 infection.

What's the Danger

A touch of the hand is enough to spread the virus that causes COVID-19. Consider this simple scenario:

Birth of an Infection

- Carey, a worker who's carrying the virus but doesn't know it, picks up a hammer;
- As a result of the contact, the virus goes from Carey's hand to the hammer handle;
- After finishing the task, Carey puts the hammer back in the toolbox;
- Patsy fetches the hammer from the toolbox;
- The virus on the handle gets transmitted to Patsy's right hand;
- Patsy rubs her eyes with her right hand;
- The virus passes into Patsy's body and infects her.

The Challenge

Every time one of your workers uses a hand tool, they run the risk of picking up the virus or passing it along to somebody else. While that's also true of other viruses and infectious agents, one of the things that makes COVID-19 so dangerous is that the virus that causes it can stay alive on an object or surface for hours and even days.

The 7 Things to Prevent Hand Tool Infections

Here are 7 best practices for preventing hand tools from becoming a conduit for COVID-19 infection at your workplace based on guidance from the Infrastructure Health & Safety Association (IHSA):

1. Proper Hand Washing

Frequent hand washing is crucial to keep the virus off the hands. In this scenario, the infection could have been prevented if Carey washed his hands immediately before using the hammer and Patsy washed her hands immediately after before she rubbed her eyes. As a general rule, all workers should be instructed in proper hand washing techniques and required to clean their hands before touching their face, eating and getting into their vehicle to go home.

2. Cleaning Hand Tools

The supervisor or person in charge of safety at the site should ensure that hand tools are frequently and properly washed, including at the start and end of each day and immediately after each use. Thus, Carey could have prevented Patsy's infection by washing the hammer down before putting it back in the toolbox. Be sure to instruct workers how to properly clean and disinfect their tools. (See the box below.)

How to Clean and Disinfect Your Tools and Equipment

1. Wear PPE such as waterproof gloves for your hands and face shield and mask to protect your eyes, face and mouth.
2. Wear coveralls to protect your clothing.
3. Make sure all power is off and disconnected on power tools and equipment.
4. Read the manufacturer's directions for cleaning to avoid possible damage from liquids and chemicals.
5. Clean surface with soap and water to remove all visible debris and stains.
6. Follow labeled instructions and safety data sheets on all containers of cleansing products you use.
7. If disinfecting products aren't available to buy, you can make your own by mixing a water and bleach solution. Check the bleach manufacturer's recommendation for mixing ratios.
8. To disinfect, typical recommendation is to allow surface to remain wet for 5-10 minutes. Rinse thoroughly, and air dry.
9. Remove disposable PPE and discard. Remove coveralls and place in a bag for washing in a bleach wash as per the bleach manufacturer's guidance.
10. Wash your hands after removing all PPE.

Source: IHSA

3. Banning Workers from Sharing Tools

If possible, furnish enough tools at the site so that workers don't have to share. Thus, Patsy wouldn't have gotten infected if she didn't have to use the same hammer as Carey.

4. Flagging Shared Tools

If sharing can't be avoided, shared tools should be identified in some fashion, e.g., a red label, that lists cleaning instructions. Thus, Patsy would have washed the hammer before using it had she known it was a shared tool. Also be sure to store shared tools in a separate toolbox with washing supplies kept nearby.

5. Making Workers Use Gloves

Where reasonably practicable, require all workers, including those who use hand tools, wear protective gloves. Thus, Patsy's infection could have been easily avoided had she or Carey been wearing gloves while using the hammer.

6. Treating Clothing as a Potential Source of Infection or Exposure

In our scenario, Patsy’s infection was transmitted via hand contact. But the virus can also cling to clothing. Thus, Carey could have spread and Patsy contracted the virus by getting it on their clothes and eventually passing it to their eyes, nose or mouth via hand or direct contact. Instruct workers to place their work clothes into a bag before leaving work and laundering it once they get home, ideally in a separate load.

7. Disinfection & Isolation

In our scenario, nobody, not even Carey, realized he was carrying the virus. But if a worker is discovered to have COVID-19 or its symptoms, the worker must be sent home and everything he touched in the past 48 hours immediately isolated and disinfected, including his tools and PPE. Other best practices include designating one or more persons to be responsible for moving, cleaning and disinfecting tools, equipment and PPE and ensuring they use PPE such as gloves and coveralls to perform those tasks.