Wash Your Hands of Hazardous Chemicals



Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE
Many workers who handle hazardous chemicals, biological agents or body fluids aren't careful about thoroughly washing their hands with soap and water afterwards. Even if gloves are used to prevent contact with such materials, hand washing is essential before eating, drinking or smoking.

WHAT'S THE DANGER
Chemicals and other contaminants can be transferred from the hands to foods, drinks or cigarettes and ingested into the body, where they can cause serious damage, especially with repeated exposure over time. Along with not eating, drinking or smoking after handling chemicals, workers who bring coffee or food items into contaminated areas are also risking exposure to toxic agents.

EXAMPLE
Desperate for a smoke, Dale, who has been handling pesticide, takes a few steps away from the building and lights up without first washing his hands. Along with being exposed to hundreds of harmful chemicals in his cigarette, Dale is inhaling poisons that have contaminated his hands.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Keep these pointers in mind to avoid exposure to harmful contaminants:

1. Gloves don't remove the need to wash your hands: If you've been handling chemicals, laboratory agents or bloodborne pathogens while wearing gloves, these can easily be transferred to your hands while gloves are being removed. Washing your hands with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds is very important.

2. Don't lick your fingers: Many people have a habit of licking a finger before turning a page on a book or manual. If you've been handling chemicals and lick your finger, you will ingest whatever is on your hands.

3. Keep foods out of contaminated areas: While refrigerators store food at a safe temperature, there's nothing safe about placing food in a refrigerator used to store biological agents, drugs or chemicals. Food and potentially toxic products should never be stored together.

4. Wash before answering nature's call: Everyone knows they should wash their hands after using a toilet. If you've been handling chemicals you need to wash your hands

both BEFORE and AFTER using a toilet.

5. Eat only in designated areas: Even if your hands are clean, eating in a potentially contaminated area isn't safe. Go outside or eat in a well-ventilated area such as a staff break room.

6. Don't chew gum or apply cosmetics: Never apply lipstick or makeup or chew gum in a potentially chemically contaminated area. Keep your hands (even gloved hands) away from your mouth, nose and eyes if you have been handling chemicals or other dangerous substances.

7. Never place chemicals in unmarked containers: There are many stories about workers taking a swig of what they believe to be soda, only to find that someone has poured a toxic chemical into the bottle. One swallow of a chemical could easily be life-threatening.

8. Read the safety data sheets (SDSs): You need to know what chemicals you are being exposed to on the job and what personal protective equipment (PPE) you must wear to prevent such exposures.

FINAL WORD
If you're working with hazardous chemicals, biological agents or handling body fluids, you need to be extra careful about washing your hands frequently. Ignoring that advice could have life-shortening consequences.