Workplace Chemicals: Handle with Care



Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Toxic chemicals are found in almost every home and workplace. In some industries such as chemical processing, they are used in great quantities. But they are also used for small, everyday tasks.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Chemicals can harm in a number of ways. Corrosive acids and caustics burn skin and eyes. Exposure to many toxic chemicals can cause health effects, both short-term and long-term. Fire, explosion and violent chemical reactions are other possibilities. Mishandled chemicals can harm people and the environment far from the workplace.

EXAMPLE

Yolanda didn't think she was exposed to many chemicals, until she inventoried the cleaning products used in her home and in her plant office work area.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

- Make sure you receive the training you need to work safely around chemicals. An added benefit of the training is that you learn to recognize chemical hazards off the job and even in unlikely settings such as offices.
- Learn to read and understand the label and the material safety data sheet (MSDS) supplied with each chemical. These will tell you the safe handling procedures. For instance, you might be told to let a chemical substance dry completely before cutting or welding the surface you have applied it to.
- Use the correct personal protective equipment to protect you from the chemical hazards. Depending on the substance, you may be instructed to wear splash-proof goggles, gloves made of a certain material to resist the chemical you are using, a particular kind of respirator, or an apron and boots made of a material that won't corrode.
- Know how to find and operate eyewashes and safety showers. If a chemical has been splashed on you, rinse the skin or eyes for a minimum of 20 minutes and call for medical aid immediately.
- If you work in a chemical environment, maintain a set of work clothes or coveralls that are separate from your street clothes and cleaned by your

company. This way you do not take chemically contaminated clothes home to wash and possibly cross contaminate your family’s clothes.
- Also learn other chemical emergency procedures, including how to call for help and, if you are authorized to do so, how to clean up spills and fight a chemical fire.

FINAL WORD

Your workplace chemical safety training is designed to keep you from being injured or developing health problems. Take this training seriously, and take it home to keep you and your family safe. Handling and storing chemicals correctly minimizes hazards.