Familiarize Yourself with Formaldehyde

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Think "formaldehyde" and very likely images of laboratories, hospitals or funeral parlors come to mind. But formaldehyde's uses go beyond that of specimen preservation and embalming fluid. It's one of the most commonly used and encountered chemicals in industry today.

You might find formaldehyde in home insulation and in the glue that holds together plywood and particle board. It's used in the textile industry where it helps prevent your clothes from wrinkling. Low concentrations of formaldehyde can be found in the air as a result of burning wood, coal, oil, gasoline or diesel fuel.

You can also find it in cigarette smoke and in certain hair smoothing and straightening products.

WHAT'S THE DANGER

Formaldehyde is combustible, toxic and corrosive.

Whether it's in a product or in the air, formaldehyde is a health hazard. It's a "sensitizing agent" that can cause an immune system response on initial exposure. It can cause allergic reactions of the skin, eyes and lungs, such as asthma-like breathing problems and skin rashes and itching. The higher the concentration, the more severe the irritation.

EXAMPLE

When formaldehyde is in a product that gets sprayed into the eyes, it can damage the eyes and cause blindness. Being exposed to formaldehyde may increase your risk of developing leukemia and brain cancer. And short-term, high-level exposure to formaldehyde could result in death.

How to Protect Yourself

The first step is to understand how you can be exposed to formaldehyde.

Under normal circumstances, at room temperature, you would find formaldehyde in the form of a colorless, strong-smelling gas, making inhalation the major source of exposure to this chemical for most people.

Formaldehyde may also take the form of a solution called formalin, in which case you could be exposed to the formaldehyde gas released from the formalin, as well as to the

liquid from spills and splashes.

You can also be exposed accidentally if you touch your face, eat food or sip a drink after using a product containing formaldehyde without first washing your hands.

Here are some basic safe practices:

- Attend all training, including refresher training, provided by your employer about formaldehyde’s hazards and safe usage.
- Wear impervious clothing, gloves, aprons and chemical splash goggles to prevent skin and eye contact with formaldehyde. And ensure that all PPE is properly maintained.
- Know where the showers and eyewash stations are in your area, how to operate them and how to find them with your eyes closed.
- When working with or near formaldehyde solutions, avoid open flames, heat, hot surfaces, sparks and other ignition sources.
- In the event of an unplanned release of formaldehyde, immediately put on a suitable respirator and leave the area.
- Report immediately any leaks, spills or ventilation failures.
- Learn the signs and symptoms of formaldehyde exposure and report any signs of illness to your supervisor.
- Seek medical attention for all exposure to formaldehyde,

even if the exposure did not seem significant.

- Remove contaminated clothing promptly and place it in a closed container. These items should not be taken home and should be laundered before reuse. Be sure to notify any laundry personnel that the clothes have been contaminated by formaldehyde.

FINAL WORD

There are standards and regulations designed to protect employees from formaldehyde exposure, including permissible exposure limits. So it’s important to follow your employer’s program. It’s there for your protection.