Oil Field Workers Die Inhaling CO

Three oil field workers died after breathing carbon monoxide (CO) gas in an oil well cellar in California.

How It Happened:

The incident occurred during perforation, a procedure to create holes in the pipe in the well to allow the well to be used for water disposal. During the procedure, water began flowing from a valve in the cellar.

The first worker, age 22, entered the cellar to turn off the valve. Upon entering the area, he collapsed and fell into the cellar. A second worker, age 24, entered the cellar to assist the first worker, but he also collapsed. A third worker, age 26, was overcome while kneeling near the opening to the cellar. He then fell into the hole.

No PPE

The workers were not wearing any personal protective equipment at the time, and no confined space atmospheric testing was performed prior to entry. Employees from another contractor went into the cellar and pulled the victims out. None of the rescuers wore any type of PPE nor was any available for their use at the site. Three workers died and four were hospitalized that day. The four later survived.

Don’t Let It Happen To You

Investigators recommended the following:

- Test the atmosphere of confined spaces before entry.
- Ventilate confined spaces so employees are not exposed to a toxic atmosphere.
- Wear approved respiratory equipment when entering confined spaces.

- Wear approved safety harnesses and lifelines when entering confined spaces.
- Have a trained rescue team ready to intervene in the event of an emergency.