Unsafe Trash is No One’s Treasure

Safety Talk

You need to handle trash every day, so it is important to know there are dangerous items in trash containers and bags that could cause you personal injury. Cuts and contact with substances in the trash could expose you to dangerous chemicals and infections.

What’s at Stake

There are certain things you should not touch unless you are specially trained to handle that kind of refuse. For the following two categories you need special training to protect yourself, you need to wear personal protective equipment and you must be authorized to deal with them:

1. Bags containing hazardous chemicals or chemical bottles such as those from a laboratory.

2. Possible biohazards such as those from a healthcare facility. This includes items marked “biohazard” and bags containing syringes, needles or broken laboratory glassware.

What Can Go Wrong

A woman was taking out the trash from her workplace. The jagged edge of a can cut her through the industrial plastic garbage bag. She cleaned her wound and put a bandage on it but it grew increasingly infected in the following week.

How to Protect Yourself

Here are some other points about trash handling:

•You need to keep in mind the fact that people who put sharp-edged

garbage into plastic bags may not have taken time to do it safely. The proper way to dispose of broken glass is to wrap the glass in cardboard or heavy paper to separate the broken edges from other garbage. That way, the pieces can’t puncture the trash bag and injure you. Other sharp items such as nails sticking out of scrap lumber also should be guarded to prevent puncture wounds.

•Wear the proper type of gloves for handling trash. Your protective equipment might be disposable or made of leather, depending on the job. You may even need chemical-resistant gloves. For general handling of garbage, leather gloves protect your hands from punctures and cuts.

•For foot protection you need enclosed shoes – not sandals – and preferably safety-toed footwear. The hard toes protect your feet in case you drop something on them, and also give some protection from spills of substances in the trash.

•It is appropriate to use safety eyewear if there is a chance of being struck by flying particles such as breaking glass.

•When dealing with tall garbage bins, use side doors if possible rather than heaving big bags up into the air. With top-loading dumpsters, make sure the dumpster lid is securely propped open before tossing in the bags. Don’t try to hold the lid up and throw a trash bag at the same time.

Keep your hands out of the way when closing a trash bin and be careful if you are lifting a lid in windy conditions because it can slam down on your hands. Never climb into a trash bin.

Do not dispose of fluorescent bulbs in trash bags and bins. This is environmentally hazardous and dangerous to people if the bulbs are broken.

Final Word

Before you work with certain kinds of refuse, you’ll need special training and equipment. So if you are working in a facility such as a laboratory or a hospital, find out what you are or are not

allowed to handle.