Hazardous Waste



WHAT'S AT STAKE?

It's important for you to understand the potential hazards that you may be exposed to while working with hazardous waste. You also need to know how to use personal protective equipment to effectively eliminate or reduce your exposure to hazardous materials. Your health may be at risk both now and in the future.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

Hazardous waste sites, as well as locations that handle hazardous materials for disposal, often contain toxic chemicals that can affect your health. Some of these effects can be acute, that is, cause harm immediately. Other chemicals may lead to long-term health effects that do not show up immediately. Whether acute or delayed, the effects of an exposure to these chemicals can impact your health and your ability to work far into your future.

EXAMPLE
One of the toxic chemicals that workers frequently encounter at hazardous waste sites is benzene, a known cancer-causing agent. Exposure can occur either through inhalation or skin absorption and can result in long-term health effects. Use of proper personal protective equipment can prevent such problems.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Laws such as the US Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) HAZWOPER regulation (29CFR 1910.120) are designed to protect you. This law requires that your facility has a written safety plan that identifies, evaluates and controls safety and health hazards that you may find at your place of work. It also requires that employers develop a site-specific work plan to address both every day and emergency operations at the facility. In addition, workers need to be properly trained so that they know the methods that need to be used, including respirators and other types of personal protective equipment, to prevent exposures to hazardous chemicals.

In addition, this regulation requires that workers participate in a medical surveillance program. This program will not only identify any health concerns that may be immediately recognized due to exposure to hazardous chemicals, but will also determine any changes from baseline biological conditions that may occur and result in long-term health effects.

FINAL WORD

Hazardous waste sites, waste cleanup operations and chemical storage and transfer sites all handle hazardous chemicals. Workers need to know how to protect themselves, not only during emergencies, but also during normal operations. They can do so by following the information provided in the health and safety plan, learning what the hazardous chemicals are and how to protect themselves from exposure.