WHMIS:The Lowdown on Labels and Pictograms



Safety Talk

What do all-purpose cleaner, paint, and fluorescent lights have in common? They all contain hazardous materials.

Hazardous materials are dangerous but it’s possible to stay safe through the use of labels and pictograms. These help you classify the type of hazardous material you’re working with and the dangers they present.

In this Safety Talk, we’ll review labels and pictograms, how to identify the hazards they warn about, and steps you should take when working with hazardous products.

What Can Go Wrong
Exposure to chemicals causes, or contributes to, a slew of serious health problems, as well as environmental hazards. While employers must ensure that hazardous products have proper and legible labels, workers also have responsibility in working safely with chemicals.

As a worker, you must:

- Check to see if a label is on a product before you use it.
- Read, understand and follow the instructions on the label.
- Ask your supervisor if you are unsure how to use and store a product.
- Ask your supervisor for a new label if the old one cannot be seen or read properly.
- Never use a product that isn’t labelled or which has an unreadable label.

How to Protect Yourself
There are two types of labels and nine types of pictograms, but don’t worry—you only need to know where to look for information and know what it means.

The most common type of label is the supplier label. There are worksite labels too, which have less, but similar information to the supplier label. Seven sections must be included on a supplier label:

- A product identifier that identifies the hazardous material being used, including its brand, chemical, generic or common names.The initial supplier identifier is the manufacturer or importer’s contact information, including name, address and telephone number.
- A pictogram, which is a hazard symbol inside a red square set on one of its points. We’ll have more information on pictograms later in this Safety Talk.

- Two signal words: “Danger” and “Warning.” Danger represents a more severe, immediate risk than Warning. n A hazard statement or statements: This describes the hazards present, based on the product’s classification. Most of these statements are standardized.
- A precautionary statement or statements: These describe the recommended steps to take to minimize or prevent adverse effects resulting from exposure to a hazardous substance.
- Supplemental label information, which is required under two circumstances: Either the product releases toxic gas when it comes in contact with water, or the mixture is acutely toxic, but the level of toxicity is unknown.

Labels should be large, legible, and located where they can easily be seen on a product. Talk to your supervisor if you encounter damaged or unreadable labels.

Returning to our discussion of pictograms, there are nine pictograms which help identify two categories of potential hazards. Five pictograms identify physical hazards, namely explosive, flammable, oxidizing, compressed gas, and corrosive.

Four pictograms identify dangers to health, including acutely toxic, corrosive, harmful/ irritant and biohazardous.

Once you recognize a pictogram, you’ll quickly know if a product is hazardous or not.

FINAL WORD
Using any chemical without knowing the hazards it poses is dangerous and irresponsible, and could result in your injury or death, or that of your co-workers or others. Learn to identify labels and pictograms and ensure you know what you are working with before starting any task.