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ACCESSING SAFETY KNOWLEDGE (ASK) SHEET: Hand Protection

Hand Protection

What would life be like for someone who lost one or both hands, or a thumb or one or more fingers? Without our hands, our most basic life activities would be difficult if not impossible. In an occupational setting our hands, fingers and thumbs are our most valuable tools. Yet, we often take them for granted by ignoring their care and protection. As a general course hands, thumbs and fingers can be subject to a variety of hazards anywhere. In this document, we will concentrate on their exposure to occupational hazards.

OSHA Regulations require employers to ‘...select and require employees to use appropriate hand protection when employees’ hands are exposed to hazards such as those from skin absorption of harmful substances; severe cuts or lacerations; severe abrasions; punctures; chemical burns; thermal burns; and harmful temperature extremes.’

(1910.138(a)) ‘Employers shall base the selection of the appropriate hand protection on an evaluation of the performance characteristics of the hand protection relative to the task(s) to be performed, conditions present, duration of use, and the hazards and potential hazards identified.’ **(1910.138(b))**

Hands are subject to punctures, lacerations, crushing and skin disorders due to use of chemicals or simply lack of care. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, injuries to hands and fingers account for an average of 37.8% of occupational injuries in the last two decades. Lacerations caused by knives are the most frequent single cause, accounting for more than 10% of occupational injuries to fingers, followed by puncture wounds from a variety of items including nails, wires, hypodermic needles and other sharp and pointed objects.

Following are some simple recommendations for the care and protection of hands while at work.

- Workers should be trained in the recognition and abatement methods for all hand-hazards in the tasks they perform. It is recommended that this training be documented.
- Workers should understand known or potential skin absorption, burns or other hazards involving all the chemicals they use. Understanding first-aid procedures for chemicals in use should be an important aspect of training in avoiding chemical hazards and skin contact. Gloves used for abating chemical exposure should be of required or recommended type and material for the specific substance. The Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for the chemical product can be very helpful as part of an effective Hazard Communication program.
- Workers should be trained in the use of all tools, including hand or powered tools with sharp edges or points and nipping or pinch-point hazards. Even tools with dull edges such as hand trowels can offer laceration hazards when the edges becoming sharpened through use.
- If personal protection equipment such as gloves are to be used, workers should be trained on how to use them correctly; how to put them on and take them off; and to recognize whether the gloves fit well and are appropriate for the task.
- Workers should be reminded often that washing hands regularly is still a recognized way of maintaining good health. Though not required by OSHA, providing the ability for employees to wash hands in the field is another good recommendation.

We need our hands and fingers to stay actively engaged in the quality of life. Protecting them should be a priority for us all, particularly in the occupational setting.