

Even Seemingly Harmless Products Can Be Hazardous



It's easy to worry about the obviously hazardous chemicals in your workplace, such as benzene, chlorine, etc. But some seemingly harmless products, such as window cleaner and hair gel, may contain chemicals that, under the right conditions, could be hazardous.

Just look at a recent warehouse fire in Brampton, Ontario.

On Dec. 17, a fire broke out at the warehouse, which stored hair care and house cleaning products, such as hair mousse and shoe cleaner. Multiple fire crews and a HazMat unit battled overnight to finally put out the fire.

Approximately 30-50 workers were in the building at the time; all made it out safely. But one worker suffered burns to his hands.

The Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Labour are investigating the cause of the fire.

The lesson: Don't underestimate the potential hazards posed by any material or product in your workplace that contains chemicals. Although so-called 'consumer products' may not pose as much of a risk to workers as other industrial chemicals, they may still pose dangers, especially if used incorrectly or exposed to heat.

That's why the WHMIS requirements may apply to some consumer products, such as cleaning supplies, adhesives and solvents. To ensure that workers are safe when using such products, take the following steps:

1. Determine if the substance is a consumer product by checking whether it's a 'controlled product' that's packaged for and sold to the general public.
2. Request an MSDS from the supplier—even items that are consumer products may still have MSDSs, especially if the supplier sells them for use by both the general public and workplaces.
3. Apply a workplace label, if required.
4. Train workers on the safe use of the product. (Go to Safety Smart for a safety talk on chemicals and cleaning products. Not a subscriber to SafetySmart? Sign up for a free trial.)

Another way to eliminate or reduce the risks of exposure to chemicals is by switching to 'green' alternatives, which may be very easy to do for items such as cleaning products where environmentally friendly alternatives are often readily available.