

# Study Finds Healthcare Workers Not Properly Trained on Hazardous Substances



When you think of the safety hazards healthcare workers face on the job, hazardous chemicals may not be the first thing that comes to mind.

But such workers can be exposed to hazardous substances, such as antineoplastic agents, high level disinfectants, aerosolized medications, anesthetic gases, surgical smoke and chemical sterilants. And it appears that healthcare employers aren't doing enough to ensure that these workers are adequately protected from such exposure.

A recent study from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) found that healthcare workers who routinely come in contact with hazardous chemicals on the job lack training and awareness of employer procedures to adequately protect themselves from exposure.

The study, which was published in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, is based on information gathered from the Health and Safety Practices Survey of Healthcare Workers. NIOSH administered the web-based survey in 2011, with more than 12,000 healthcare workers participating.

Key findings from the study include:

- Workers administering aerosolized antibiotics were the least likely to have received training on their safe use'48% said they'd never been trained'followed closely by those exposed to surgical smoke.
- Workers most likely to have received training were those who administered antineoplastic drugs (95%) and who used hydrogen peroxide gas plasma as a chemical sterilant (92%).
- For those exposed to surgical smoke, 40% didn't know if their employers had safe handling procedures. For those exposed to anesthetic gases, 25% didn't know.
- Chemical specific training and awareness of employer safe handling procedures varied by type of workplace, such as ambulatory healthcare services versus hospital.

*Bottom line:* Employers in all industry sectors must determine *all* of the health and safety hazards in the workplace (such as by using a job hazard assessment form), develop appropriate safety measures to address those hazards and ensure that workers are aware of and trained on these measures.