

Section 3

Your Right to Know About Workplace Chemicals

Purpose

To understand the serious damage that working with some chemicals can cause to your health.

To understand your rights under OSHA to know about the dangers of chemicals in your workplace.



Section 3

**What you will find
in this section...**



Page	Fact Sheet	Title
3-3	---	Task 1
3-7	---	Hazardous Substance Fact Sheet: Toluene
3-9	#1	How Hazardous Chemicals Enter Your Body.
3-10	#2	Will It Get You Now or Later?
3-12	#3	Respirators: A Last Ditch Control.
3-15	#4	Your Right to Know: OSHA's Haz Com Standard.
3-21	#5	What's on a Label?
3-23	#6	Making Work Safer
3-24	—	Summary

Task 1

- **Use at least two fact sheets to answer the questions.**

Read Lee's story below. Then answer the questions that follow:

Lee had worked at a small chemical manufacturing facility in Michigan for a few years. His job was in the mixing room, where solvents such as toluene, methyl ethyl ketone (MEK), hexane, and acetone were used to make adhesives for the auto industry.

Lee usually wore a respirator while working in the solvent-based adhesive (SBA) room, which he stored in a cabinet inside the room. He changed the cartridges about once a week.

After working in the SBA room for 5 years, Lee attended a health and safety training program where he learned about the health effects of different kinds of chemicals. He started to think about the symptoms that he felt. He often had bad headaches and felt hung-over. (Lee did not drink alcohol.) He seemed to forget a lot of things as well.

Many times, Lee felt so tired that he would fall asleep in the afternoon and not get up again until the next morning. But he never felt really rested, no matter how much he slept. He had wild mood swings. He would fly into a rage and yell at his wife and children for no reason. Eventually, he noticed that he could not keep his hand and arm from shaking.

At the health and safety training, Lee found out about chemical fact sheets, called Material Safety Data Sheets. He got some from his employer and brought them home from work to show his family and doctor.

Task 1

continued

- **Read the fact sheets on the following pages to answer the questions below.**

1. Could Lee's symptoms have been caused by the chemicals he worked with?
2. How could these chemicals have gotten into his body?
3. Lee wore a respirator when he worked in the solvent-based adhesive room. Why didn't the respirator prevent harm from these chemicals?
4. Why do you think that Lee did not notice or mention his symptoms sooner?

Task 1

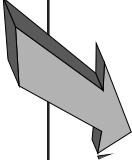
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- **Read the fact sheets on the following pages to answer the questions below.**

5. Which of Lee's rights under OSHA were violated?
6. If you were the Health & Safety Committee at Lee's workplace, what training and information would you recommend be provided to workers to prevent more injuries?
7. If you were the Health and Safety Committee, what other changes would you recommend to prevent other workers from becoming hurt?

Task 1 continued

Lee's Diagnosis



Lee saw a number of different doctors for his problems. Most of the doctors told him that he had a cold or the flu or could find nothing at all. With the help of his local union and the UAW Health and Safety Department, Lee found a doctor who was board certified in occupational medicine.

This doctor diagnosed his condition as **Solvent Poisoning** and prescribed medication that helped to control his symptoms. The doctor also advised Lee that he would only get worse if he continued to work with solvents. The occupational doctor helped Lee's condition from worsening, but permanent damage to his nervous system had already been done.



Summary

Your Right to Know About Workplace Chemicals

- ★ Chemicals can enter your body in many ways: through the lungs when you breathe, through the skin, through the mouth, and through the eyes. We often ignore how much of a chemical gets into the body through the skin or eyes.
- ★ Exposure to many workplace chemicals can result in serious and permanent injury to your health such as cancer, asthma, nerve damage, even death. Chemicals can have short term (acute) and long term (chronic) effects on your body.
- ★ The OSHA Hazard Communication Standard says that all employees have the right to know what chemicals are at the worksite, the hazards of working with these chemicals, and how to work with them safely.
- ★ Your company is required by OSHA to train workers on the specific hazards of chemicals before you work with them.
- ★ Your company is required by the Hazard Communication Standard to have a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for every hazardous chemical in your workplace.
- ★ Your company must label all hazardous material containers. The label must name the specific health effects of the chemical including target organs.

Summary

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Your Right to Know About Workplace Chemicals

- * Respirators often **DO NOT** protect workers' health. Engineering controls such as ventilation or substituting safer chemicals are much more effective ways of preventing injury to workers' health and to the environment.
- * **OSHA's HAZWOPER** Standard requires employers to offer medical surveillance to employees who are part of a Haz Mat Emergency Response Team, or who are injured while responding to an emergency.