California Schools JPA℠

SAFETY MATTERS
RISK MANAGEMENT NEWSLETTER

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PREVENTING WORKPLACE BURNS

OBJECTIVE To provide information about hazard prevention and protection that can dramatically lessen the risk of burns in the workplace.

Every year, for National Burn Awareness Week — the first full week in February — the American Burn Association brings attention to burn injuries that result in thousands of hospitalizations per year. While a vast majority of these burns actually occur in the home, workplace burns are a very preventable source of injury.

TYPES OF WORKPLACE BURNS

Thermal Burns

Thermal burns are burns caused by the heat from liquids (called "scalding" burns), open flames, hot objects, and explosions. The most important priority with thermal burns is controlling and stopping the burning process. Thermal burns can be prevented by wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), using fire prevention tactics, and having procedures and emergency action plans related to fire detection and protection.

Chemical Burns

Chemical burns result from skin or eyes being exposed to strong acids, alkaloids, or other corrosive or caustic materials that eat away or "burn" skin and deeper tissue. In the workplace, these accidents can occur after exposure to industrial cleaners (such as rust removers or drain cleaners), chemicals in laboratories, or manufacturing workplaces. One of the best ways to prevent chemical burns is to make sure all workers are well-versed in Hazard Communication, which covers the symbols and labels that will communicate chemical risk. These labels will also include the important information on the steps workers can take to prevent burns if they come into contact with dangerous chemicals. Workers who will come into contact with chemicals should consider Hazard Communication training and should also take refresher courses as these standards can be updated often.

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Electrical Burns

Current travels through the body and meets resistance in tissue, resulting in heat burn injuries. High-voltage areas and machinery should be clearly marked to avoid burns from electrical sources. Workers should also make sure to identify live wires, avoid contact with water while working with electricity, and wear the PPE necessary to avoid burns by electricity. Completing electrical safety training may provide an additional overview of the types of electrical hazards workers may find on a worksite and the OSHA standards that help avoid accidents.

Sun Exposure Burns

While these could technically be considered a thermal burn, sun exposure burns are worthy of special consideration. Employees who work under the sun should be well versed in the sun safety practices that will keep them safe. These include taking precautions to reduce hours under harsh direct sun, seeking shade if possible, and wearing sun-protective work clothing, hats, and sunscreen to reduce the risk of burns from sun exposure.

BURN SEVERITY

First Degree

First-degree burns cause minimal skin damage and are considered superficial since they affect the top layer of the skin. A mild sunburn is an example of this type of burn, where the burn site is red, painful, dry, and without blistering.

Second Degree

The damage from a second-degree burn extends beyond the top layer of the skin and can often cause the skin to blister or become extremely red and sore.

Third Degree

Third-degree burns destroy both the epidermis and the dermis, and they can also go deep and destroy tissue underneath. These burns can appear white or charred.

Fourth Degree

In a fourth-degree burn, all skin layers are affected, and there is also potential for damage to muscle, tendons, and bone. Skin grafts do not work on these severe burns, so much so that fourth-degree burns may require amputation if injury occurs in a limb or extremity.

EMPLOYER'S DUTY

Under the law, employers have a responsibility to provide a safe workplace. This overarching responsibility is shared, but ultimately, if a worker is not safe, the employer is likely at risk.

HAZARD COMMUNICATION

Color codes, posters, labels or signs to warn employees of potential hazards are an employer requirement under OSHA, and these vital pieces of Hazard Communication are extremely important in burn prevention. Workers should be trained on how to recognize symbols and other Hazard Communication codes, and the Globally Harmonized System of Classification and Labeling Chemicals (GHS) communication standards should be used to identify material hazards in a consistent and easily recognizable way. When hazardous chemicals are found in the workplace, employers are also required to produce and provide a written Hazard Communication plan.

This California Schools JPA fact sheet is not intended to be exhaustive. The discussion and best practices suggested herein should not be regarded as legal advice. Readers should pursue legal counsel or contact their insurance providers to gain more exhaustive advice.