Drywalling Safety Meeting Kit

What’s At Stake

Drywallers put the finishing touches on our home and office interiors by installing and finishing sheetrock walls. Physical stamina is required to lift, cut, and maneuver heavy sheets of drywall and fix them in place. Finishing and sanding seams is also an ergonomic and physical challenge. Consider that this demanding work is often done on a construction site and at heights, and it is clear that drywallers need to think safety on the job.

WHAT IS DRYWALL?

Used as a façade for interior walls and ceilings, drywall typically comes in sheets measuring 4×8 feet or 4×12 feet. The relatively inexpensive home and commercial building product is typically comprised of a powdery white material known as calcium sulfate dihydrate (gypsum), hardened between thick paper. In the construction sector, select crews usually hang drywall and tape and plaster the seams between sheets. Once dry, these workers circle back and sand seams and edges releasing a fine airborne dust during the process. Depending on the region, the drywall may be known by a wide range of names that include the following.

- Plasterboard
- Wallboard
- Sheet Rock
- Gypsum Board
- Buster Board
- Custard Board
- Gypsum Panel

What’s the Danger

DANGERS OF DRYWALL

Although drywall is generally thought of as a relatively safe construction material, the silica dust released when cutting and sanding takes place creates a significant health risk for installers and demolition crews.

Drywall sheets and the compounds used in joints contain elements such as talc, calcite, mica, gypsum, silica, and even high-risk items such as mercury. When these sometimes-toxic particles are inhaled, upper respiratory conditions such as asthma and lung cancer can result. In addition, products imported from China have put workers in harm’s way due to excessive use of sulfur and other contaminants. And workers who come in contact with old joint compounds are routinely exposed to

asbestos.

Companies that install, remove, and manufacture drywall are also expected to meet the OSHA silica standard for drywall and implement best practice policies to minimize worker risk. By understanding how much exposure to drywall dust is dangerous, safe dust collection methods, and the proper use of personal protective clothing and equipment, safety measures can be implemented to avoid unnecessary negative health effects for working people.

Heavy metals also rank among the pervasive health hazards faced by construction sector workers. Gypsum remains a core drywall manufacturing material that lacks consistency in terms of hazardous elements. Drywall routinely includes heavy metals and mercury is widely considered among the most dangerous. Products with origins in coal waste, for example, may possess mercury levels 10 times higher than others. This neurotoxin has proven particularly problematic in synthetically made drywall products.

An expansive view of drywall usage and health naturally leads to a consideration of peripheral products. The joint compound used to fill in seams and cracks may include stunningly hazardous materials. Carcinogens such as formaldehyde and acetaldehyde are routinely coupled with crystalline silica. When inhaled, these highly potent agents can damage the lungs and pose a significant health risk from skin contact.

CAUSES OF A DRYWALL INSTALLER'S ON-THE-JOB ACCIDENTS

- **Heavy lifting.** Overexertion injuries are one of the most common injuries drywall installers suffer. Workers installing drywall must handle heavy drywall sheets that can weigh anywhere between 55 to more than 120 pounds multiple times each workday. Often they must also bend while lifting it. This can cause workers to suffer overexertion soft tissue injuries, such as back, spine, and shoulder injuries, that can require rest, medication, and physical therapy for months or longer before the injury heals.
- **Repetitive movements**. The tasks involved in installing drywall are repetitive—taping, sanding, and cutting are a few. This can result in workers suffering repetitive movement injuries to their hands and wrists, such as trigger finger and carpel tunnel syndrome, or back strains, sprains, and other injuries. In some cases, a worker could suffer chronic pain and limitations of movement that prevent him from performing the physical jobs associated with drywall installation.
- **Falls**. Falls are another leading cause of drywall workers' injuries—and deaths. Working from heights or ladders while carrying or handling drywall sheets can result in a worker losing his balance and falling. Tools, debris, construction materials, and spilled food and drink can also pose fall risks for workers. Workers can suffer traumatic brain injury, broken bones, fractures, internal organ damage, or spinal cord damage if they fall.
- **Long work shifts.** Many soft tissue injuries that drywall installers experience are made worse when workers have no time to rest the injury during the work day or work long shifts. This does not give injuries, like strains and sprains, time to heal, and a worker may be forced to take time off work as the pain intensifies.
- **Cold weather.** Drywall installers working on construction sites may be exposed to cold weather, which can reduce circulation and make repetitive strain injuries more likely.
- **Stress-related accidents.** Workers are often under pressure to get the job done quickly and can fall, lift improperly, or otherwise be injured in an accident in the haste to meet an unrealistic work schedule.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

PPE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WORKERS HANDLING DRYWALL

- **Breathable Masks:** Companies are advised to maintain a significant number of disposable masks at all times.
- **Coveralls:** Disposable protective wear that delivers full coverage of the torso and extremities prevent drywall silica dust from accumulating on ordinary work clothes and skin. Usage prevents exposure and workers carrying toxins home on their reusable/ non-disposable protective clothing.
- **Eye Wear:** Protective goggles remain a construction industry standard. Just as particles can harm the lungs when inhaled, other organs are at risk when these elements enter the body through the eyes.
- **Full Head Protection:** Suitable headgear is generally advisable to keep silica dust from landing on the head, hair, and inside the ears. Wearing coveralls with hoodies ranks among the preferred safety methods.
- **Foot Coverings:** Dust builds up on work boots and footwear perhaps more easily than any other part of the body. Foot coverings allow workers to dispose of the dust accumulations as needed and help prevent the spread of this dust to other areas.

FINAL WORD

Drywall installation is almost always needed at new construction sites and sometimes in building and home improvement projects. While not as dangerous as some construction jobs, drywall installers face many dangers of accidents that can lead to injuries.