Sanitizer Safety – Safety Talk

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Hand sanitizers are an important part of a workplace – especially during time of pandemic or infection outbreak. Hand sanitizer does not replace proper handwashing but has been more common as it's ready-to-use and portable when you need to ensure your hands are germ-free. Keep in mind though, that there are risks associated with the use of hand sanitizers – especially ones containing alcohol.

WHAT'S THE DANGER?

There are two main types of hand sanitizers. Those that are alcohol-free, and those containing alcohol.

Alcohol-Free Hand Sanitizer

This type of hand sanitizer is less effective and is infrequently used in workplaces. There is little risk to using these other than the risk of not sanitizing to the level that is needed.

Alcohol-based Hand Sanitizer

Many popular hand sanitizers contain some sort of combination of alcohol – either isopropyl alcohol, ethanol or n-propanol. The higher the alcohol content, the more effective the hand sanitizer. Some versions can contain anywhere from 60% to 95% alcohol. As the percentage of chemicals and alcohol in your sanitizer increases, so does the risk.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be hazardous in multiple ways. It is flammable, can be explosive and can be dangerous to your skin if overused. Here are some quick tips when using hand-sanitizer in your workplace or at home:

Respect slickness

Obey signs such as "Caution: Wet Floor." Clean up spills immediately. When you come indoors from rain or snow, your wet footwear slides more easily. Newly waxed and high gloss floors are also hazards. On slippery or rough surfaces, take small steps and walk slowly.

Use Handwashing First: Proper handwashing with soap and water is still the most effective way to reduce the spread of infection so only use hand-sanitizer if this option is not available.

Proper Use: If you are using hand sanitizer, follow these steps to get the best results possible. Just like when washing with soap and water, make sure you cover your hands fully – rubbing the sanitizer in for at least 20 seconds.

Storage and Hazards: Keep hand sanitizer stored in a cool dry place. This is especially important for alcohol-based sanitizers where the risk of hazards increase with the percentage of alcohol. Keep away from open flames and in the event of an incident with hand sanitizer, wear respiratory protection when extinguishing the fire. Follow your company's procedures for storage and use of flammable liquids to minimize the risk. In case of a spill, clean up immediately with water. If storing large amounts of hand sanitizer with alcohol understand the explosion dangers that come with keeping high quantities of a flammable substance in the area.

Do Not Ingest: Hand sanitizers are not intended for human consumption. In fact, alcohol-based hand sanitizer is considered an over-the-counter drug in the US. As such it's important to treat it with the same respect as any other similar drug. Ingestion – especially in high amounts can prove to be fatal. In the case of hand-sanitizer poisoning, call 911 immediately.

Skin Safety: Excessive use of alcohol-based hand sanitizer can be a risk as it is known to dry out the skin. There are some sanitizers available that add a component to help decrease the dryness caused by the alcohol. Excessive use can also leave your hands or whatever you have sanitized with a fire risk. There have been cases where people have suffered severe burns after sanitizing their hands then coming in contact with flame.

FINAL WORD

Hand sanitizers are a convenient alternative when handwashing isn't possible. Always use caution when using hand sanitizer and follow recommended application and use. *Use it with care or don't use it at all.*