OSHA vs. Hexavalent Chromium

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is coming down hard on a known cancer-causing agent present in industries across the United States. Those industries will soon have to meet the federal regulatory agency's new limits.

Hexavalent chromium (CrVI) is linked to lung cancer and less serious ailments such as dermatitis and skin ulcers. Unlike many OSHA regulations, the proposed rule for CrVI is mandated by a court order. In April 2003, the U.S. Court of Appeals ordered OSHA to propose new limits for CrVI.

"Because this rule was brought by court order, OSHA is very serious about meeting deadlines and getting the final rule in place," says Ira Donovan, Burns & McDonnell project manager. "Industries need to get serious about how they will meet the new requirements of the rule."

OSHA proposes to lower the permissible exposure limit for all hexavalent chromium compounds from 52 to 1 microgram per cubic meter as an 8-hour time-weighted average. The time-weighted average is intended to approximate the exposure seen in a typical workday. The new standard will apply to several industries that use certain paints and pigments, and the welding of stainless and high-strength steels and other metals. Among the facilities and industries that will be most affected by the rule:

- Metal finishing facilities
- Aviation manufacturing, overhaul and repair facilities
- Food production facilities
- Stainless and structural steel welding
- Construction and manufacturing
- Textile manufacturing and printing

Exceptions to the rule include the manufacturing of portland cement, which is used in construction, and certain aspects of the ship building industry.

Industries will have 90 days after the final rule is established in January 2006 to set up their administrative controls for hexavalent chromium (including recordkeeping, and protective clothing and equipment). Engineering controls must be installed two years after the final rule to be in total compliance.

For more information, contact Ira Donovan, 816-822-4376.

What can be done at your facility to protect employees from hexavalent chromium exposure?

A better question might be:

What isn't being done?

Frequently seen conditions that can add to employees' exposure include:

- Poor work positioning during welding, grinding and cutting tasks. Often exposures can be dramatically reduced just by moving a fan or repositioning the worker.
- Local exhaust system maintenance is overlooked. Regular cleaning will help keep local exhaust ventilation systems operating efficiently and will help avert a failure of the system.
- Work surfaces are not vacuumed or cleaned with wet methods. Housekeeping indirectly impacts exposures through worker contact with contaminated surfaces.

"Correcting these issues may not be the last word on hexavalent chromium in your facility, but there are low-cost or no-cost measures you can take to reduce the potential for exposure," says Ira Donovan, Burns & McDonnell project manager.

For more information on Burns & McDonnell services, visit ***www.burnsmcd.com/OSHAHexCR/index.html***