

“Are Your Employees Reading Chemical Labels?”

Why It Matters:

- ☞ EPA surveys have indicated that a large percentage of workers do not read labels for pesticides and other chemicals.
- ☞ There are more OSHA citations for violations of the Hazard Communication Standard, 29 CFR 1910.1200, than for any other General Industry Standard.
- ☞ To state the obvious – hazardous chemicals are hazardous, causing such tragedies as fire, explosions, and serious illness if not handled properly.



Find out what employees know about the chemicals they use. As a training exercise, choose a substance that employees commonly use, and ask your group to describe the basic information found on its label: Common and chemical name, the kind of hazard it represents, and how to handle and use it safely. If they don't know or aren't really sure, then it's time to reinforce a fundamental Hazardous Communication safety message: "Always read the label before using any product that may contain a hazardous substance." (Remember, this rule also applies to common "household" - type products such as cleaners.)

Know the reasons why employees don't read labels. EPA survey of employees who use pesticides strongly suggest many reasons employees don't read labels, including:

- ✓ Poor reading skills: Chemical labels aren't exactly literary masterpieces, they are often full of unfamiliar words that few people readily understand, and sometimes use small print that is physically difficult to read.
- ✓ Language barriers: Employees for whom English is a second language may simply be unable to read and understand the information on a label.
- ✓ Familiarity and overconfidence: Employees who have been using a substance for a long time may think they already know what they need to know about the substance and its hazards, even if they don't.

Review the labeling requirements for hazardous substances. Remind your group that all products containing hazardous chemicals are required by law to include certain safety information on the label. Emphasize that this information is there to protect them, and that it's part of their responsibilities as employees to read labels and understand what they mean. If possible, reproduce an actual chemical label as a handout and review the information point-by-point:

- ☞ Brand name, common name, and chemical name
- ☞ Signal words – Danger for substances that are highly flammable or corrosive; Poison for those that are highly toxic; and, Caution or Warning for other types of hazards
- ☞ Instructions for safe handling and use – remind the group that these are not optional
- ☞ Description of the principal hazards of the product and how to avoid them
- ☞ First-aid information if present on the label
- ☞ Symbols and number codes that indicate the level of hazard that is present