

Environment, health, and safety

Nurses and chemical toxins: Your right to know

To protect yourself and your patients, learn about your rights and your potential chemical exposure.

By Holly E. Carpenter, BSN, RN

With the recent news headlines about lead in children's toys, potential reproductive toxicants in patients' medical devices, mercury in fish, and toxins hidden in cosmetics and personal care products, today's nurse must be knowledgeable about the harmful health effects of everyday chemicals.

Nurses are exposed to varying amounts of toxic chemicals in the workplace, home, and community. Drugs, some plasticizers, disinfectants, sterilizing agents, pesticides, certain cosmetics and personal care products, cleaning agents, cigarette smoke, and fuel exhaust are just some of the toxins we may encounter. Reports of occupationally acquired asthma, reproductive problems, and cancer rates among nurses and other healthcare workers are of concern.

How can you protect both yourself and those you care for?

- **Know your rights.** The Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) of 1970 was enacted to “make sure employers provide their workers a place of employment free from recognized hazard to safety and health, such as exposure to toxic chemicals.” The Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, a federal law since 1986, aims to protect public health, safety, and the environment from chemical hazards.
- **Expand your basic work knowledge.** Attend all training, education, and monitoring programs on toxic chemicals that your employer offers. Know where your facility keeps its material safety data sheets. Created by the chemical's manufacturer, these sheets provide information about the chemical, including toxicity, health effects of exposure, first aid measures, protective equipment needed, storage, disposal, and reactivity. By being informed, you can educate others as well as recognize whether you and your patients are being exposed to chemicals.
- **Be prepared.** Look to the future. Learn about your fa-

cility's hazard vulnerability assessment (HVA). This assessment makes personnel aware of what types of hazards they may be exposed to and of any chemical manufacturing plants located in the area. Common natural disasters and proximity to nuclear power plants are examples of what might be on a facility's HVA. Become familiar with and periodically review your workplace's emergency response plans. Know how to access Toxics Release Inventory data. Be aware of the health effects of hazardous chemicals you may come in contact with. Ensure appropriate staff training for disaster preparedness. Know where personal protective equipment (PPE) is located, how to don and remove it, and what levels of PPE are appropriate for different situations.

- **Decrease toxic chemical use.** Get on your facility's purchasing committee, and advocate for the use of “green” or at least less toxic products. Ensure that your facility has an active program or policy to phase out, substitute, reduce and, when feasible, eliminate toxic chemicals. Encourage administrators to use integrated pest-management strategies instead of relying on pesticides. Use these “green” practices at home as well.
- **Keep legislators informed.** Educate your elected officials on how chemicals and exposure to them affect human and environmental health. Advocate for safer chemical legislation. Volunteer to work on campaigns for candidates with strong positive records on environmental health issues. Vote for legislators who support a healthy environment.
- **Be proactive in environmental health concerns.** Join or start an environmental health task force within your state nurses association, and be an active member of your facility's Green Team.
- **Serve as a role model for other nurses.** Share your environmental health success story by visiting www.theluminaryproject.org and becoming a nurse “luminary.”
- Finally, **know that the ANA is active and supportive of these issues.** For up-to-date information on environmental health issues facing nurses today, visit www.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/OccupationalandEnvironmental/environmental-health.aspx. ★

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