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- **Part Number:** 1910
- **Part Title:** Occupational Safety and Health Standards
- **Subpart:** Z
- **Subpart Title:** Toxic and Hazardous Substances
- **Standard Number:** 1910.1048 App C
- **Title:** Medical surveillance - Formaldehyde

I. Health Hazards

The occupational health hazards of formaldehyde are primarily due to its toxic effects after inhalation, after direct contact with the skin or eyes by formaldehyde in liquid or vapor form, and after ingestion.

II. Toxicology

A. Acute Effects of Exposure

1. **Inhalation (breathing):** Formaldehyde is highly irritating to the upper airways. The concentration of formaldehyde that is immediately dangerous to life and health is 100 ppm. Concentrations above 50 ppm can cause severe pulmonary reactions within minutes. These include pulmonary edema, pneumonia, and bronchial irritation which can result in death. Concentrations above 5 ppm readily cause lower airway irritation characterized by cough, chest tightness and wheezing. There is some controversy regarding whether formaldehyde gas is a pulmonary sensitizer which can cause occupational asthma in a previously normal individual. Formaldehyde can produce symptoms of bronchial asthma in humans. The mechanism may be either sensitization of the individual by exposure to formaldehyde or direct irritation by formaldehyde in persons with pre-existing asthma. Upper airway irritation is the most common respiratory effect reported by workers and can occur over a wide range of concentrations, most frequently above 1 ppm. However, airway irritation has occurred in some workers with exposures to formaldehyde as low as 0.1 ppm. Symptoms of upper airway irritation include dry or sore throat, itching and burning sensations of the nose, and nasal congestion. Tolerance to this level of exposure may develop within 1-2 hours. This tolerance can permit workers remaining in an environment of gradually increasing formaldehyde concentrations to be unaware of their increasingly hazardous exposure.

2. **Eye contact:** Concentrations of formaldehyde between 0.05 ppm and 0.5 ppm produce a sensation of irritation in the eyes with burning, itching, redness, and tearing. Increased rate of blinking and eye closure generally protects the eye from damage at these low levels, but these protective mechanisms may interfere with some workers' work abilities. Tolerance can occur in workers continuously exposed to concentrations of formaldehyde in this range. Accidental splash injuries of human eyes to aqueous solutions of formaldehyde (formalin) have resulted in a wide range of ocular injuries including corneal opacities and blindness. The severity of the reactions have been directly dependent on the concentration of formaldehyde in solution and the amount of time lapsed before emergency and medical intervention.

3. **Skin contact:** Exposure to formaldehyde solutions can cause irritation of the skin and allergic contact dermatitis. These skin diseases and disorders can occur at levels well below those encountered by many formaldehyde workers. Symptoms include erythema, edema, and vesiculation or hives. Exposure to liquid formalin or formaldehyde vapor can provoke skin reactions in sensitized individuals even when airborne concentrations of formaldehyde are well below 1 ppm.

4. **Ingestion:** Ingestion of as little as 30 ml of a 37 percent solution of formaldehyde (formalin) can result in death. Gastrointestinal toxicity after ingestion is most severe in the stomach and results in symptoms which can include nausea, vomiting, and severe abdominal pain. Diverse damage to other organ systems including the liver, kidney, spleen, pancreas, brain, and central nervous systems can occur from the acute response to ingestion of formaldehyde.

B. Chronic Effects of Exposure

Long term exposure to formaldehyde has been shown to be associated with an increased risk of cancer of the nose and accessory sinuses, nasopharyngeal and oropharyngeal cancer, and lung cancer in humans. Animal experiments provide conclusive evidence of a causal relationship between nasal cancer in rats and formaldehyde exposure. Concordant evidence of carcinogenicity includes DNA binding, genotoxicity in short-term tests, and cytotoxic changes in the cells of the target organ suggesting both preneoplastic changes and a dose-rate effect. Formaldehyde is a complete carcinogen and appears to exert an effect on at least two stages of the carcinogenic process.

III. Surveillance considerations

A. History

1. **Medical and occupational history:** Along with its acute irritative effects, formaldehyde can cause allergic sensitization and cancer. One of the goals of the work history should be to elicit information on any prior or additional exposure to formaldehyde in either the occupational or the non-occupational setting.

2. Respiratory history: As noted above, formaldehyde has recognized properties as an airway irritant and has been reported by some authors as a cause of occupational asthma. In addition, formaldehyde has been associated with cancer of the entire respiratory system of humans. For these reasons, it is appropriate to include a comprehensive review of the respiratory system in the medical history. Components of this history might include questions regarding dyspnea on exertion, shortness of breath, chronic airway complaints, hyperreactive airway disease, rhinitis, bronchitis, bronchiolitis, asthma, emphysema, respiratory allergic reaction, or other preexisting pulmonary disease.

In addition, generalized airway hypersensitivity can result from exposures to a single sensitizing agent. The examiner should, therefore, elicit any prior history of exposure to pulmonary irritants, and any short- or long-term effects of that exposure.

Smoking is known to decrease mucociliary clearance of materials deposited during respiration in the nose and upper airways. This may increase a worker's exposure to inhaled materials such as formaldehyde vapor. In addition, smoking is a potential confounding factor in the investigation of any chronic respiratory disease, including cancer. For these reasons, a complete smoking history should be obtained.

3. Skin Disorders: Because of the dermal irritant and sensitizing effects of formaldehyde, a history of skin disorders should be obtained. Such a history might include the existence of skin irritation, previously documented skin sensitivity, and other dermatologic disorders. Previous exposure to formaldehyde and other dermal sensitizers should be recorded.

4. History of atopic or allergic diseases: Since formaldehyde can cause allergic sensitization of the skin and airways, it might be useful to identify individuals with prior allergen sensitization. A history of atopic disease and allergies to formaldehyde or any other substances should also be obtained. It is not definitely known at this time whether atopic diseases and allergies to formaldehyde or any other substances should also be obtained. Also it is not definitely known at this time whether atopic individuals have a greater propensity to develop formaldehyde sensitivity than the general population, but identification of these individuals may be useful for ongoing surveillance.

5. Use of disease questionnaires: Comparison of the results from previous years with present results provides the best method for detecting a general deterioration in health when toxic signs and symptoms are measured subjectively. In this way recall bias does not affect the results of the analysis. Consequently, OSHA has determined that the findings of the medical and work histories should be kept in a standardized form for comparison of the year-to-year results.

B. Physical Examination

1. Mucosa of eyes and airways: Because of the irritant effects of formaldehyde, the examining physician should be alert to evidence of this irritation. A speculum examination of the nasal mucosa may be helpful in assessing possible irritation and cytotoxic changes, as may be indirect inspection of the posterior pharynx by mirror.

2. Pulmonary system: A conventional respiratory examination, including inspection of the thorax and auscultation and percussion of the lung fields should be performed as part of the periodic medical examination. Although routine pulmonary function testing is only required by the standard once every year for persons who are exposed over the TWA concentration limit, these tests have an obvious value in investigating possible respiratory dysfunction and should be used wherever deemed appropriate by the physician. In cases of alleged formaldehyde-induced airway disease, other possible causes of pulmonary dysfunction (including exposures to other substances) should be ruled out. A chest radiograph may be useful in these circumstances. In cases of suspected airway hypersensitivity or allergy, it may be appropriate to use bronchial challenge testing with formaldehyde or methacholine to determine the nature of the disorder. Such testing should be performed by or under the supervision of a physician experienced in the procedures involved.

3. Skin: The physician should be alert to evidence of dermal irritation of sensitization, including reddening and inflammation, urticaria, blistering, scaling, formation of skin fissures, or other symptoms. Since the integrity of the skin barrier is compromised by other dermal diseases, the presence of such disease should be noted. Skin sensitivity testing carries with it some risk of inducing sensitivity, and therefore, skin testing for formaldehyde sensitivity should not be used as a routine screening test. Sensitivity testing may be indicated in the investigation of a suspected existing sensitivity. Guidelines for such testing have been prepared by the North American Contact Dermatitis Group.

C. Additional Examinations or Tests

The physician may deem it necessary to perform other medical examinations or tests as indicated. The standard provides a mechanism whereby these additional investigations are covered under the standard for occupational exposure to formaldehyde.

D. Emergencies

The examination of workers exposed in an emergency should be directed at the organ systems most likely to be affected. Much of the content of the examination will be similar to the periodic examination unless the patient has received a severe acute exposure requiring immediate attention to prevent serious consequences. If a severe overexposure requiring medical intervention or hospitalization has occurred, the physician must be alert to the possibility of delayed symptoms. Followup nonroutine examinations may be necessary to assure the patient's well-being.

E. Employer Obligations

The employer is required to provide the physician with the following information: A copy of this standard and appendices A, C, D, and E; a description of the affected employee's duties as they relate to his or her exposure concentration; an estimate of the employee's exposure including duration (e.g. 15 hr/wk, three 8-hour shifts, full-time); a description of any personal protective equipment, including respirators, used by the employee; and the results of any previous medical determinations for the affected employee related to formaldehyde exposure to the extent that this information is within the employer's control.

F. Physician's Obligations

The standard requires the employer to obtain a written statement from the physician. This statement must contain the physician's opinion as to whether the employee has any medical condition which would place him or her at increased risk of impaired health from exposure to formaldehyde or use of respirators, as appropriate. The physician must also state his opinion regarding any restrictions that should be placed on the employee's exposure to formaldehyde or upon the use of protective clothing or equipment such as respirators. If the employee wears a respirator as a result of his or her exposure to formaldehyde, the physician's opinion must also contain a statement regarding the suitability of the employee to wear the type of respirator assigned. Finally, the physician must inform the employer that the employee has been told the results of the medical examination and of any medical conditions which require further explanation or treatment. This written opinion is not to contain any information on specific findings or diagnoses unrelated to occupational exposure to formaldehyde.

The purpose in requiring the examining physician to supply the employer with a written opinion is to provide the employer with a medical basis to assist the employer in placing employees initially, in assuring that their health is not being impaired by formaldehyde, and to assess the employee's ability to use any required protective equipment.

[↩ Next Standard \(1910.1048 App D\)](#)

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