

CWA Occupational Safety and Health Fact Sheet #8

Freon & the Workplace

Freon (made up of chemicals known as chlorofluorocarbons) is a generally colorless, non-flammable gas or liquid. It is primarily used as a refrigerant and chemical intermediate in the manufacture of lubricants. Freon is also used as a solvent in aerosol formulations/propellants, as a foaming or blowing agent, and as an intermediate in the manufacture of fluorocarbon resins.

Health Effects

Freon is an irritant to the skin and respiratory system. Contact with the skin may cause dermatitis or skin rashes. Upper respiratory exposure (particularly to high concentrations) to Freon may cause an irregular heartbeat (cardiac arrhythmia), asphyxia, dizziness, and loss of concentration and coordination. If workers should experience these medical conditions, they should contact a physician for the appropriate medical care. When seeing a doctor, affected workers should make sure that they indicate that their work involves exposure to Freon.

Freon has been identified as a significant environmental contaminant. As Freon vaporizes into the air, the chemical mixture causes a depletion of ozone in the stratospheric or upper atmosphere. This depletion of ozone results in increased amounts of ultraviolet radiation reaching the earth's surface that, in turn, can cause serious human and environmental health effects. Because of the harmful effects that Freon has upon the environment, a ban on the production of chlorofluorocarbons went into effect in 1995.

Medical Surveillance

Employers should provide all employees who work with or around Freon annual physical exams. If the employer does not presently give such exams, these should be negotiated into the collective bargaining agreement. All physical exams should include possible cardiac or heart effects from acute exposure to Freon.

Controlling the Hazard

Employers should utilize engineering (such as enclosed systems or local exhaust ventilation equipment) and administrative controls (like less time worked in Freon exposed work areas) to eliminate/minimize worker exposure to Freon. If this is not possible, employers should provide the necessary personal protective equipment including:

- Non-porous gloves and gauntlets, protective clothing or aprons, goggles or face shields, and shoe protection. If necessary, respiratory protection should be provided.

What Can You Do?

The key to making the workplace safe for all CWA members is strong, active local safety and health committees. The committee can identify dangerous conditions at the workplace and discuss them with management. If the employer refuses to resolve the safety and/or health hazard(s), the committee can request an OSHA inspection. The committee should always coordinate its activities through the local officers, the CWA Representatives, and negotiated

safety and health committees.

In addition, CWA members may obtain information and assistance by contacting the:

CWA Occupational Safety and Health Department

501 Third Street, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20001-2797

Webpage: www.cwasafetyandhealth.org

Phone: (202) 434-1160

Developed in 1980 and revised in 1987, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002 2004, 2009, and 2017.