

TOOLBOX TALK #6

CONTROLLING VOLATILE ORGANIC COMPOUNDS

Volatile organic compounds (VOC) are common chemical contaminants found in workplaces. They are a source of odors, some of which can be a health hazard for workers. Reducing exposure to these chemicals can lead to better health outcomes for employees, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). VOCs found in workplaces can include:

- Caulks, sealants and coatings
- Paint, varnishes and stains
- Cleaning agents
- Fuels and combustion products
- Fabric materials, furnishings and carpeting



If VOCs are left uncontrolled, health issues may arise. Symptoms reported by workers in building environments with VOCs include:

- Itchy, watery or burning eyes
- Skin irritations or rashes
- Nose and throat irritation
- Nausea
- Headache and dizziness
- Fatigue

If chemical exposure levels are high, severe consequences can include damage to the kidneys, liver and central nervous system.

Workplace exposures

If workers suspect exposure to VOCs is causing health issues, they should:

- Report their concerns immediately to supervisors or those responsible for building safety and health or maintenance
- See their health care provider
- Avoid the use of air fresheners and room deodorizers, as these can result in eye, nose and throat irritation

For employers and building owners, CDC offers a variety of recommendations, including:

- Always respond to employees when health concerns are reported
- Establish clear procedures for recording and responding to complaints. Log all complaints and determine a plan for response
- Apply remedial actions, and follow up to ensure the action has been effective.
- Ask product suppliers for information on chemical emissions and potential health hazards
- Select products that emit low or no VOCs when choosing new carpets, flooring, office furniture and paints
- Choose low-VOC-emitting cleaners
- Do not store chemical products in equipment rooms where they could contaminate the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning system
- Provide proper ventilation and maintain HVAC systems