

TOOLBOX TALK #20

STAY SAFE AROUND WOOD DUST

Exposure to wood dust can cause health problems for workers. Wood has natural chemicals and may contain bacteria, mold or fungi, according to the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). The International Agency for Research on Cancer considers wood dust a carcinogen, meaning it can cause cancer.



Occupations that have an increased risk of exposure to wood dust include construction workers, carpenters, and workers employed in furniture and cabinet making, sawmills and logging.

Health concerns

CCOHS says on-the-job exposure to wood dust may cause the following health issues:

- **Irritation.** Wood dust can be irritating to a worker's eyes, nose and throat, and may result in shortness of breath, runny nose and inflammation of the mucous membrane of the eye.
- **Skin problems.** Wood dust exposure may lead to dermatitis, in which the skin becomes red, itchy and dry. Skin blisters also may form.
- **Respiratory issues.** Workers who breathe in wood dust may experience a number of respiratory issues, including occupational asthma and tightness of the chest. These issues may worsen with continued exposure.
- **Chemical concerns.** "Toxic effects are specific to the species of wood," CCOHS states. "When the body absorbs the chemical, the chemical may cause headaches, loss of weight, breathlessness, giddiness, cramps and irregular heartbeat."

Staying Safe

Employers should ensure workers are educated on how to work safely around wood dust. To protect against wood dust exposure, CCOHS recommends:

- Knowing what kind of wood you'll be working with and all the hazards associated with that specific type.
- Using an industrial ventilation system to reduce dust.
- Keeping tools and blades sharp and in good working order. Dull tools can cause more dust to be released into the air.
- Vacuuming work areas with a vacuum that has a HEPA filter, and using wet clean-up methods.
- Wearing respiratory protection when necessary and protective clothing, and practicing good hygiene by regularly washing your hands and face.
- Avoid dust accumulation to help prevent combustible dust explosions.