



MAY TOPICS

1. Preventing Workplace Fires
2. What Does OSHA Say?

AVOIDING WORKPLACE FIRES.

Emergencies

It was about 4 a.m. on Saturday, March 7, when Huntsville, Alabama's AMF bowling alley caught fire. As smoke spread over the sleeping city, firefighters entered the building to battle the blaze, which is believed to have started in the kitchen. While crews moved through the building, the heat intensified and the entire structure suddenly went up in flames. Two fire captains were injured in the flashover.

Fortunately, no one was bowling — or working — when the building caught fire. Still, the business was ruined and two firefighters were injured. Fires like this occur all over the U.S. each day, bringing billions of dollars in losses. How can you make sure your workplace doesn't become a statistic?

FINDING THE FIRE HAZARDS

The first step to preventing workplace fires is to know what causes them. Maine Municipal Association's Risk Management Services lists the following common hazards and controls:

Heating equipment. Improperly installed, operated or maintained furnaces can bring significant danger. Every furnace and heater has a minimum clearance distance on all sides and above. Always keep objects and building components away from this area. Never store combustible material in furnace rooms, and avoid using temporary heating units in public buildings.

Electrical equipment. Misused, overloaded, damaged or improperly-maintained electrical equipment is a common cause of workplace fires. Do not leave cables coiled when plugged in, and only use extension cords to temporarily power equipment that is in use at the moment. Use multiple outlet strips for computer equipment, and not for appliances or other electrical instruments. Avoid overloading circuits.

Cooking equipment. Microwaves, coffeemakers and stoves can spell trouble if misused. Make sure break rooms are equipped with smoke detectors, and never leave cooking unattended. Be sure to follow microwave popcorn instructions carefully.

Mechanical friction. Improperly maintained or cleaned mechanical equipment can lead to fires. Keep bearings lubricated and aligned. Also, keep conveyors and mobile equipment clean and free of combustible material, which could accumulate.

Housekeeping. Poor housekeeping practices can have dangerous repercussions. Avoid storing excessive amounts of boxes and other combustible materials. Make sure stored material never blocks exits, walkways, electrical panels or emergency equipment.

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Proximity hazards. Watch out for hazards outside of the workspace, such as buildings within 100 feet of your site. Hazards include, but are not limited to, nearby fuel tanks, dumpsters, weeds, grass and brush.

Smoking. If you permit smoking inside your facility, you may want to reconsider. Unauthorized smoking or poorly-organized smoking areas can place everyone at risk.

Special hazards. Take extra precaution regarding cutting/welding and other hot work that could produce flames, slag or sparks. Other similar hazards include flammable liquid

storage and handling; spontaneous combustion from oily rags, chemicals, hay and leaves; commercial cooking equipment, liquid petroleum gas (LPG) and natural gas.

Now let's look at ways to apply your knowledge, and stop fires before they start.

Each year, fires erupt at some 70,000 U.S. workplaces. These blazes kill hundreds of employees, injure thousands and cause billions of dollars in property damage. Most workplace fires result from human error — not equipment failure. Proactive programs that are reinforced by proper training could prevent such deadly incidents from taking place.



FIRE PREVENTION STRATEGIES

Fire risks are everywhere. They stem from chemicals and electricity, flammable liquids, poor housekeeping and other sources. In other words, no workplace is completely safe. Below are some ways to ensure your workers understand what causes fires, and how they can be prevented.

- » Store chemicals properly, in tightly-closed containers.
- » Read labels and safety data sheets (SDSs) for fire hazards related to the chemicals in use.
- » Keep flammable liquids away from sources of ignition.
- » Separate incompatible chemicals.
- » Regularly check containers for damage or leaks.
- » Clean flammable liquid spills immediately and properly dispose of liquids and cleanup materials.
- » Keep cords and plugs in good condition.
- » Do not overload electrical circuits.
- » Keep hot equipment away from combustible materials.
- » Shut down electrical equipment that smokes or sparks.
- » If smoking is allowed, make sure smokers extinguish cigarettes and matches completely in designated containers.
- » Handle compressed gas cylinders carefully, and keep them away from heat.
- » Keep work areas free of trash, combustible scrap materials and other debris.
- » Place oily rags in metal containers with lids.
- » Keep machines free of dust and grease.
- » Train employees to report fire hazards they cannot immediately correct.

Source: Marine Operations Center of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration



CORD-AND-PLUG-CONNECTED EQUIPMENT: WHAT DOES OSHA SAY?

Lockout/Tagout



We recently looked at OSHA's answers to employers' questions about training certification and LOTO verification. Today, we'll look at what OSHA has to say about individuals performing maintenance on cord-and-plug-connected equipment covered under an exception in the LOTO rules.

Employers often write to OSHA, asking for clarifications of its requirements. Sometimes OSHA writes back. The agency's responses to the following questions could prove useful to many employers.

AUTHORIZED EMPLOYEES SERVICING CORD-AND-PLUG-CONNECTED EQUIPMENT

An employer wrote to OSHA, asking whether an employee performing servicing or maintenance on cord-and-plug-connected electric equipment under the exception found in 29 CFR 1910.147(a)(2)(iii)(A), must be an "authorized employee" under the standard.

OSHA'S INTERPRETATION: No. As long as the method of isolating the energy to the equipment is limited to unplugging the equipment and maintaining control of the plug, §1910.147 does not require an employee who performs maintenance on cord-and-plug-connected equipment to be an "authorized employee."

'SINGLE ENERGY SOURCE' VS. 'PLUG-AND-CORD CONNECTED'

An employer wrote, asking about a worker performing maintenance on a single piece of shop machinery, such as a lathe or drill press. Such equipment has a single energy source with a disconnect switch located in clear view, within 5 unobstructed feet of the machine, on an adjacent wall. The company wanted to know, if a worker places the disconnect switch in the "off" position, removes the fuses from the disconnect switch and the machine's control panel and verifies that the machine will not start — and if another employee would have to walk past that employee to reach the disconnect switch — is the switch "under the exclusive control" of the employee performing the maintenance? And is the employee still required to place a lockout or tagout device on the disconnect switch?

OSHA'S INTERPRETATION: Yes. The exception found at Section 1910.147(a)(2)(iii)(A) specifies that it applies to cord-and-plug-connected equipment only. It does not apply to other forms of energy-isolation devices, such as a disconnect switch. The disconnect switch described in the scenario above would have to be locked out.



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