WEEK 8 FEBRUARY · ~5 MIN READ · ONTARIO CONSTRUCTION

WHMIS & Hazardous Materials Refresher

That pail of sealer, the drum of solvent, the bag of cement — they all carry chemical hazards. WHMIS is how we know what's in them. But knowing what's in it is the first step, not the whole answer: the label and the data sheet tell you what the hazard is, and your employer's assessment of *this task* is what decides the controls.

The hazard

Construction chemicals burn skin, damage lungs, catch fire, or do harm that shows up years later. Plenty of them look harmless. WHMIS is more than labels and a binder — it includes the education and training you're entitled to for the products you actually work with, so you can read a label, find a data sheet, and understand what it means for the job in front of you.

What to do

- **Read the label before you open anything.** Pictograms, signal word, hazard statements, precautions. If you can't identify it, don't use it.
- **Know where the safety data sheets are and how to pull the one you need**, before you need it — not while someone is rinsing their eye.
- **Understand where the SDS stops.** It tells you the hazards and what kind of protection is appropriate. It does **not** set your controls. The employer looks at this task, this exposure, and this space, and works down the hierarchy: substitute something safer, ventilate or enclose it, change the work method — and PPE last, once the rest has done what it can.
- **A respirator is never something you just pick up because a data sheet mentions one.** It comes through the employer's respiratory program: the right selection for that contaminant, medical clearance, training, fit testing, and a change schedule. No program, no respirator — the answer is a different control.
- **Decanting has rules.** If you pour product into another container, it needs a workplace label. There are narrow exceptions where you fill it from a properly labelled supply and use it yourself immediately, or keep it under your own control for that shift **with the contents clearly identified on it** — but it never travels, never gets left, and never gets handed to someone else unlabelled.
- Use products only as labelled, never mix unless the instructions say it's safe, and keep containers closed and away from heat and ignition sources.
- Know the first-aid and spill steps for what you're using **before** you start, including where the eyewash is.

Watch out for

- Unlabelled or wrongly labelled containers. Don't guess, don't sniff it, don't use it.
- Product split into a shop jug with no workplace label and left on the bench.
- Solvents, dust, or fumes in a tight, poorly ventilated winter space — the enclosure that's keeping the heat in is keeping the vapour in too.
- Reaching for a mask to get through a job that should be ventilated or done a different way.

Talk it over

- Can everyone here find the data sheet for the product they'll open today, in about a minute?
- Which product on this site worries you most — and has anyone actually assessed the task, or are we going on the label alone?

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