

300f012 The Silica Problem

Normally vitamins and minerals are good for you; but it all depends on how it's introduced to the body. There's one mineral exposure that is bad news. Called by various names, the "silica problem," "silicosis," or Crystalline Silica, the situation is considered as the second coming of the asbestos problem. It may have a serious impact on your business if it includes operations that expose your employees (or yourself) to the health hazard.

"Silicosis" refers to a lung disease that is triggered by long-term, inhalation of silica particles. The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) estimates that nearly two million American workers are vulnerable to contracting the disease and that the disease accounts for several hundred deaths per year.

Persons in the construction industry are particularly at risk. The risk of silica particle exposure is greatest in jobs involving abrasive blasting, mixing/making concrete (or brick) and drilling masonry material. Other areas of concern (again according to OSHA) include the following:

- asphalt pavement manufacturing
- ceramics (& china) manufacturing
- tool and die industry
- steel and foundry industries
- any job using abrasive blasting for cleaning, smoothing or etching

Generally, silicosis develops only after years of exposure to Crystalline Silica. The levels of the disease may either be Chronic, Accelerated or Acute. Symptoms include fatigue, shortness of breath (particularly after a strenuous activity), and chest pain and weight loss. A chest X-ray may determine lung damage. In some cases, silicosis may be fatal.

Silicosis claims and lawsuits are becoming more common. There have been reports of very costly damages being awarded, since the more serious claims involve long-term health issues. It is important to look for ways to avoid having anyone contract silicosis. Try to apply precautions such as the following:

- If possible, substitute other materials for silica when performing abrasive blasting
- Use proper respirators with correct seals
- Do not permit eating, drinking or smoking near work areas that generate silica particles
- Use proper ventilation to clear work areas of particles
- Make showers available to workers, along with either disposable or washable work clothes. NOTE: Clothing should first be vacuumed before it is removed
- Provide training to employees in how to monitor work situations and in recognizing (and reporting) silica related problems
- Wash hands and face before eating/drinking
- Use "wet" sweeping to clear dust from work areas

There are other methods to help fight this problem. If your operations include exposure to this health hazard, be sure to discuss solutions with insurance professional.

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