

Safety Topic



Safety News

State Compensation Insurance Fund

Issue Three, 2009

Poison Oak

Poison oak is a plant you should learn to recognize and know what to do to prevent or minimize its unpleasant – often disabling – effects.

Poison oak can grow as a vine, trailing shrub or upright woody shrub. It can flourish in moist wooded areas or on dry exposed hills. Characteristically, the poison oak leaf looks like a miniature oak leaf with a triple leaf pattern leading off one stem with prominent veins and a shiny surface; but it can change its appearance in different seasons. The leaves may stay green while on the stem or they may change to shades of red. Even without its leaves, the bare wood and roots of the poison oak plant are still dangerous.

Stay away from vegetation that you suspect may be poison oak. Any object (clothing, animal or tool) exposed to poison oak is a contaminating carrier that can expose others or re-expose you when touched again.

When you must enter or work in areas where there's poison oak, take the following precautions:

- Cover all exposed skin. Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants tucked into boots, leather gloves with gauntlets, a hat, and a neck scarf.
- Following exposure, remove clothing and wash separately from other laundry; remove shoes first and leave them outside for decontamination by washing.

- When dressing the next time, put shoes on last so any remaining poison oak residue on shoes doesn't contaminate the inside of trousers.



- For some people, barrier creams, injections or tablets have proven effective in preventing the toxic oil contained in all parts of the poison oak plant from causing irritation or reaction.
- If contact is made with the poison oak plant or something contaminated by it, wash the area immediately or take a shower – not a bath – using a strong soap or detergent.
- If an exposure to poison oak results in a reaction, consult a pharmacist for minor inflammation and itching and a physician for more severe reactions.

No part of a poison oak plant should ever be eaten or burned. If ingested or inhaled, poison oak can cause violent reactions with sometimes deadly results. Destroy poison oak only by using approved vegetation sprays specifically designed for its eradication. □

TOPIC REVIEW

Instructor _____

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Location _____

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Safety Recommendations



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Please forward to the person responsible for your safety program

News about Occupational Safety and Health in Public Agencies

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Employer Education Series

State Fund continues to promote community educational outreach by increasing the quantity and frequency of employer seminars. These seminars are produced and sponsored by State Fund and are open to State Fund policyholders. The seminar topics cover all aspects of worker's compensation and are offered statewide.

As part of State Fund's Employer Education Series, the local State Fund Loss Control departments offer safety seminars dedicated to loss prevention. They feature safety training targeted to specific industries and safety topics of interest to California employers. Various programs in the series are developed in conjunction with State Fund insured Group Programs and external affiliates and partners. Some of these partners are occupational safety and health providers such as Cal/OSHA Consultation Service, the Department of Health Services, and the University of California.

The goal of State Fund's Employer Education Series is to present valuable information from recognized safety and health experts to enable employers to reduce the frequency and severity of workplace injuries, facilitate regulatory compliance, and increase business profits.

The program venues provide the opportunity for attendees to have their workplace safety questions immediately and personally answered by industry experts. The typically half-day seminars are usually held at regional State Fund offices. To learn what programs are scheduled in your area, visit www.scif.com and click on Seminars. □

Reporting Work-Related Injuries

State Fund's Claims Reporting Center (1-888-222-3211) is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week for policyholders to report injuries as soon as they occur. Agents will do the necessary paperwork to get the claim started and refer the injured to the designated physician or provider.

Within 8 hours of any serious illness or injury (requiring hospitalization over 24 hours, other than for medical observation or where there is permanent employee disfigurement) or death occurring in the workplace or in connection with employment, employers must report the incident to the Division of Occupational Safety and Health. □

This Public Agencies Safety News is produced by the Safety and Health Services Department of State Fund to assist clients in their loss control efforts. Information or recommendations contained in this publication were obtained from sources believed to be reliable at the date of publication. Information is only advisory and does not presume to be exhaustive or inclusive of all workplace hazards or situations. Permission to reprint articles subject to approval by State Compensation Insurance Fund.

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S T A T E C O M P E N S A T I O N I N S U R A N C E F U N D

Your Emergency Action Plan

Emergencies in the workplace can happen unexpectedly, but with an action plan in place and workers trained to respond quickly and appropriately to those emergencies, efficiency can be optimized, damage and injuries can be minimized, and, in some cases, lives can be saved. An Action Plan details what actions will be taken to ensure employee safety in an emergency. Review your company's Emergency Action Plan and train all workers in its elements.

Your Emergency Action Plan should describe in detail what actions would be taken by whom for emergencies likely to occur in your workplace. It should include procedures for reporting emergencies, activating alarms, equipment shutdown, rescue, escape, first aid, and employee accounting. Make sure workers know and understand their role in the plan for various emergency scenarios such as fire, explosion, earthquake, chemical spill, severe injury or illness, and workplace violence, etc. Training and random emergency drills should be held at least annually to allow workers to practice the response procedures.

In an emergency, time is a critical factor in minimizing injuries and damage. Do your workers know how to respond in the event of a medical emergency? Are there workers trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid?

Are emergency response phone numbers (fire department, ambulance, medical facility, etc.) clearly posted where they can be readily accessed? Does the worksite have the necessary equipment to protect against the possible hazards your workers

may encounter on the job and do workers know how to use or access it (e.g. fire extinguishers, first aid equipment, emergency wash stations, personal protective equipment, oxygen tanks, ice packs, etc.)?

Effective emergency communication is vital before, during, and after an emergency not only with company personnel, but also with emer-

gency personnel and your workers' relatives. An established chain of command should clarify who has authority to make decisions when an emergency exists, direct activities including evacuation, notify outside emergency or medical personnel, and authorize work shutdown. Review your communication system and update the plan periodically or whenever the plan, personnel, equipment or worksite changes.

Websites containing information that can assist you in developing an Emergency Action Plan include State Fund's website at www.scif.com, California's Office of Emergency Services at www.oes.ca.gov, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency at www.fema.org. □



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The Expert's Corner

Protecting Workers From Noise-Induced Hearing Loss

Being in compliance with the Cal/OSHA (or Federal OSHA) noise regulations does not always prevent work-related hearing loss or a workers' compensation claim. That's because research indicates that the current regulations simply aren't protective enough.

Cal/OSHA's noise regulations have a permissible noise exposure level (PEL) of 90 dBA (decibels, A-weighted) for 8 hours. The regulations also set an "action level" of 85 dBA. When employees are exposed above this action level, the employer must implement a hearing conservation program that includes annual hearing tests to determine if employees have experienced a hearing loss.

There are two deficiencies with the current regulations that put employees at risk. First, the Cal/OSHA PEL and action level are not protective enough. Secondly, some industries (most notably construction and agriculture) are exempt from having a hearing conservation program. Without annual hearing tests, a worker may not notice (or bring to the attention of the employer) a hearing loss until it



becomes debilitating. Once hearing is lost, the damage is permanent.

There are guidelines for employers that protect employees from the damaging effects of occupational noise. One of these is the threshold limit value (TLV) set by the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH). Another is the recommended exposure limit (REL) set by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). Both guidelines recommend an exposure limit of 85 dBA for an 8-hour workday.

Not only do ACGIH and NIOSH guidelines

lower the exposure limit to 85 dBA, they also lower what is called the "exchange rate" from 5 dBA to 3 dBA. When the sound level increases by the decibel value of the exchange rate, the allowed duration is halved. In other words, Cal/OSHA allows an employee to be exposed to 90 dBA for 8-hours, 100 dBA for 4-hours, etc., while ACGIH and NIOSH recommendations allow 85 dBA for 8-hours, 88 dBA for 4-hours, etc. That's quite a difference between what's allowable under the law and what's considered protective. In addition, NIOSH and ACGIH recommendations for annual hearing tests do not exempt any industries.

If you want to save workers from the debilitating effects of hearing loss, and prevent costly workers' compensation claims, protect your employees by following the ACGIH or NIOSH guidelines. □

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Safeguard Firefighter Heart Health

The risk to heart health is greater for firefighters than for most other workers because of their frequent physical exertion, exposure to contaminants, and stress. However, many job risks can be controlled through medical surveillance, safe work practices, safety equipment, and training.

All firefighters should receive pre-job medical screenings. After being hired, they should have regular heart health monitoring and periodic medical checkups. As certain personal factors can increase heart health risks – such as age,

gender, and medical or family history – firefighters should participate in wellness/fitness programs, exercise, eat right, stay hydrated, get adequate sleep, and stop smoking.

All firefighters should be trained in first aid and CPR and be taught to recognize signs of cardiac distress and immediately report suspected symptoms. For emergencies, an automatic external defibrillator (AED) should be kept on all fire apparatus.

Because fire alarms or 911 emergency calls can

trigger a sudden increase in heart rate, stress level, and physical exertion, adequate numbers of responders should be dispatched to an incident to rapidly control the scene and shorten the event. When relief crews are called early in an incident it can prevent over-exertion of the initial responders. An on-site recuperation vehicle can stabilize and refresh firefighters with a heated/ cooled atmospheres, hot/cold fluids, and wet towels or warm blankets.

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Prevent Cross Contamination

When recommended safe work practices are not strictly followed, workers can spread contaminants around the worksite and into their homes by soiled clothing, shoes, and skin contact. Contaminants can also be transferred by way of items workers touch, sit on or walk on. Good personal hygiene, including hand washing, showering, and changing dirty clothing and shoes, can help prevent cross contamination.

Workers that handle chemicals and contaminants in the workplace are aware that the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, safety glasses, respirators, coveralls, and boots, can reduce or eliminate their exposures. But, if workers don't properly wash, remove or decontaminate soiled PPE after leaving the work area, they can spread the contaminants outside the work zone, to themselves, their coworkers, and to their families, homes, and cars.

The spread of contaminants is hazardous when unprotected workers, coworkers or family members come into contact with the substance. Skin exposures occur if they touch a soiled surface, and accidental ingestion can occur if they eat or drink something that has been contaminated. The contaminants of concern include chemicals such as solvents,

herbicides, and pesticides, and industrial materials such as lead, asbestos and fiberglass. Potentially infectious materials such as blood and other body fluids pose a bloodborne pathogen hazard.

When workers hug family members, prepare food, or touch the furniture, bedding, and carpets in the home, they could contaminate them if they have not washed their skin and removed or decontaminated soiled clothing and PPE. Workers can contaminate their coworkers and the worksite when they contact areas such as the break room, restroom, or office areas. Workers can also increase their own exposures if they eat, drink or smoke before washing their hands and removing or cleaning their PPE.

Cross contamination of the workplace can be prevented by removing or decontaminating PPE and washing hands before exiting the work zone. To prevent cross contamination at home, workers should wash their hands and faces at the end of a work shift and change into clean clothes and shoes. Workers can also take a shower and wash their hair before leaving work or as soon as they get home. Work clothes should be washed in hot water, separately from the family clothing, and given two rinse cycles. □

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Firefighters should also recognize the signs and symptoms of heat stress, especially the need for acclimation after a sudden change in temperature or time off the job. If workers wear the appropriate respirator throughout fire suppression and control, it can reduce the inhalation of smoke contaminants and particles that can result in hypoxia, a shortage of oxygen in the body and lead to heart stress. Because a respirator increases physical demands, job tasks should be evaluated while workers wear them.

Job-related stress can be managed by firefighters when they understand what factors can induce stress, recognize the physical effects of stress on



their body, and are able to manage stress with shift spacing and incident debriefing. Because noise exposure to diesel engines, sirens, air horns, and roaring fire has been linked to hypertension and heart disease, workers should wear appropriate hearing protection.

Other risk-reduction measures include changing response procedures; using other relief personnel; positioning command posts, staging, rest areas, and vehicles upwind of fire scenes; avoiding idling diesel engines near workers; and using ventilation and exhaust systems to remove contaminants from apparatus bays and living quarters. □

October is National Ergonomics Month

October has been designated *National Ergonomics Month (NEM)* by the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society (HFES) with the goal of raising awareness about the principles and benefits of applied ergonomics. Simply put, ergonomics is the science of making tools, tasks, products, environments, and systems safer and more comfortable for human use. The October campaign strives to educate the public about how to make the changes that can improve their safety, performance, and comfort.

State Fund encourages its insureds to participate in NEM. To get you started, we have developed a comprehensive ergonomics educational CD-ROM, "Ergonomics: How May We Help You?" available free of charge to State Fund policyholders. The CD has everything you need to get your ergonomics program started and maintained:

- General information
- Tools to identify risk factors
- Training material
- Steps to develop a written program
- Cost benefits of an ergonomics program
- Effective medical management

To get your copy of the CD and find out what other safety information is available to you (such as ErgoMatters® and bilingual Safety Meeting Topics) visit www.scif.com or contact the Loss Control Department of your local State Fund office. □

