



HEALTH HAZARD EVALUATIONS

WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM?

- More than 294,000 new cases of nonfatal occupational illnesses were reported in private industry in 2002.
- Some occupational diseases are caused by agents or working conditions for which there are no regulations or for which allowable exposure levels may not protect all workers.
- Changing and emerging industries and processes create new and unstudied occupational health problems. Techniques for controlling these, or controlling well-recognized occupational health hazards, may not be known to employers and employees.

WHAT HAS NIOSH ACCOMPLISHED?

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Health Hazard Evaluation (HHE) program is a Congressionally mandated program that responds to requests for evaluations of workplace health hazards from employers, employees and their representatives, and government agencies. NIOSH conducts studies of workplaces in response to these requests to determine if workers are exposed to hazardous materials or harmful conditions. An HHE presents an opportunity to obtain information on occupational exposures for which no standards exist or for which existing standards may not protect all workers. Workplace exposures studied include chemicals, biological agents, work stress, noise, radiation, and ergonomic stressors. At no cost to the employer, NIOSH evaluates the workplace environment and the health of employees by reviewing records and/or conducting on-site testing. More than 12,000 HHEs have been completed since the inception of the program in 1971. Since 1999, NIOSH has been conducting follow-back surveys of HHE participants to assess their satisfaction with the process and to learn whether the recommendations provided led to workplace improvements.

Examples of program in action:

In each of the following, an HHE led to important findings linking adverse health effects and occupational exposures. Follow-up activities were carried out to inform and assist employers, employees, physicians, and others who play a role in reducing exposure and preventing disease.

- Assessment and control of exposure to metalworking fluids, which have been associated with the development of hypersensitivity pneumonitis, a disabling lung disease;
- Evaluation of exposure to ultraviolet light as a cause of skin and eye irritation; and
- Recognition of the potential for overexposure to wood dust during furniture stripping and refinishing.

HHEs have been central to the public health response to terrorist attacks by providing state-of-the-art methods for assessing exposure, raising awareness of occupational health concerns among emergency responders, and developing strategies to improve preparedness for future events.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Emerging occupational health hazards will continue to be a primary focus of the HHE program. NIOSH will work to inform employers and employees of the HHE program's availability as a unique resource to provide independent, science-based evaluations of a wide variety of occupational health hazards. Increasing efforts will be made to reach Spanish-speaking workers and their employers. Results from the follow-back surveys will be used for continuous improvements in the HHE program.

Additional information is available at www.cdc.gov/niosh/hhe. For more information on other NIOSH programs, visit www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/pib/.

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