



Gord Woodward

Nanaimo-based writer Gord Woodward has covered everything from ergonomics in truck cabs to safety motivation, but he always learns something new from our officers in Ask an Officer. In this edition, he speaks with Lisa Kennedy about sensitizers (right).



Helena Bryan

From writing about health and safety, creating documents for land treaties, and covering local news, North Vancouver-based writer Helena Bryan has a diverse history of telling B.C.'s stories. In the cover story (page 7) she reveals the happy end to a two-year pilot into barriers to protect bus drivers from acts of violence.



Lucy Hyslop

As a writer who also teaches skiing and yoga, Lucy Hyslop says she constantly reminds people about safety. In this edition, she covers the City of Surrey's commitment to reducing MSIs for pool workers (page 12).



Susan Kerschbaumer

Susan Kerschbaumer is a communications specialist living in Victoria, B.C. In this edition she delves into a piece of B.C. history — the inclusion of farm workers under the *Workers Compensation Act* (page 21).

Prevent exposure to sensitizers



Lisa Kennedy
Occupational hygiene officer

Region: Nanaimo
Years on the job: 8

In this issue, we speak with certified industrial hygienist and WorkSafeBC occupational hygiene officer Lisa Kennedy about the hazards of sensitizers in the workplace. Sensitizers are part of WorkSafeBC's province-wide occupational disease strategy that runs throughout 2017.

Q. What are sensitizers?

A. Sensitizers are materials that can cause severe skin and/or respiratory responses after exposure. They can be inhaled or come into contact with your skin. There's quite a long list of sensitizers. Some of the common ones include:

- Paints and coatings used in vehicle and industrial painting
- Construction materials, such as epoxy, glues, or adhesives, roofing materials, tar or glue used with vapour barriers, and insulation foam
- Flour in baking
- Dyes in hairdressing and industrial use
- Concrete additives such as curing compounds and binding agents
- Some wood types, including western red cedar, ash, beech, and spruce

Q. What health problems can they cause?

A. Skin rashes and respiratory reactions, like severe asthma attacks, can occur and are potentially life-threatening. Sensitization can result in an immediate reaction where people have to be taken to hospital.

The way your body reacts to a sensitizer is an immune response, which makes it challenging to talk about specific symptoms because we all have different immune systems. For some people, subsequent exposure after being sensitized to a material may cause intense responses, even at very low exposures levels. Cross-sensitivity can occur when a worker who is sensitized is exposed to similar chemicals.

If you have a reaction to a sensitizer, you shouldn't ever be near it again.

Q. How do I know if the materials I'm using are sensitizers?

A. A lot of time these things have an odour to them so that can be a clue — but don't rely on that. Review the safety data sheets for each product you use, looking for the terms sensitizer, sensitizing, allergy, or asthma. Also, check the WHMIS labels in your workplace. The following symbols can indicate the presence of a sensitizer in a WHMIS controlled product:



Q. As an employer who uses sensitizers, I understand I need an exposure control plan. What should it cover?

A. You should first ask yourself: “Do we have to be using this product?” If you can't substitute it with something else, you must have an exposure control plan specific to your workplace.

Your exposure control plan must include:

- A statement of purpose and responsibilities
- Risk identification, assessment, and control
- Education and training of workers
- Written work procedures
- Hygiene facilities and decontamination procedures, where applicable

You may also be required to include health monitoring and documentation in your plan, which is to be reviewed annually.

In addition to an exposure control plan, you need to follow WHMIS requirements. These include providing safety data sheets, labelling materials, and training staff.

It's also helpful to make sure your first aid attendant understands what sensitizers are in the workplace. This will help ensure that a worker who has a reaction gets appropriate medical treatment.

Q. I've heard we are supposed to use ALARA levels for sensitizers. What does that mean?

A. ALARA stands for “as low as reasonably achievable.” What that means is that we expect employers to not just meet the exposure limits, but to be below them where you can. You need to take measures to keep a worker's exposure to a level as low as is reasonably achievable.

Q. As a worker, how do I protect myself from exposure to sensitizers?

A. Personal protective equipment is important. Let's take the example of an auto body painter using isocyanate products — these are sensitizers. The worker would need to wear an air-supplying respirator, and eye and skin protection.

You can educate yourself about the risks, and other protective measures you can take, at worksafebc.com. You can also talk with your worker health and safety representative (for workplaces with 9–19 workers) or your joint health and safety committee member (for workplaces with 20 or more workers).

If you think you've had a reaction to a sensitizer, make sure you report it to your first aid attendant or employer.

Q. Where can I get more information about sensitizers?

A. Start with [Part 5](#) and [Part 12](#) of the OHS Regulation to learn about employer responsibilities.

Search worksafebc.com for “sensitizers” to find free resources that include industry-specific information.

Looking for answers to your specific health and safety questions? Send them to us at worksafemagazine@worksafebc.com, and we'll consider them for our next Ask an Officer feature. ☺

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