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Ready, set: New silica standards are almost a go

Implementation of the new standards for respirable crystalline silica for general industry is just around the corner. Need a refresher as that date approaches? Here's a review of what they are, how they came about and how your company can stay in compliance.

Issuing a new set of rules

The OSHA Respirable Crystalline Silica Standard for General Industry will take effect June 23, 2018. Rules governing the construction industry were implemented last September.
OSHA issued the new standards based on more recent research into the dangers of silica. The aim: to protect the health of employees by limiting exposure and putting new safety measures into action.

Respirable crystalline silica: a serious health hazard

Silica is a mineral found in stone and sand. A fine dust called respirable crystalline silica is produced when employees drill, grind, blast or cut these materials. The people performing these tasks may inhale the harmful particles, which settle in their lungs.

Employees exposed to crystalline silica are at increased risk of developing silicosis, an incurable and sometimes disabling or fatal lung disease. Respirable crystalline silica has also been linked to lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and kidney disease. OSHA says the new guidelines could prevent some 1,600 people a year from developing silicosis and save almost 700 lives annually.

What do the guidelines mean for your company?

The new rules will affect some 295,000 general industry employees across 30 sectors. Activities that produce respirable crystalline silica include abrasive blasting with sand or coal slag; manufacturing natural and engineered stone countertops, brick, concrete block, artificial stone and ceramic products; precast concrete operations; foundry work; and operations that employ sand.

The OSHA guidelines are extensive and can be difficult to process. You can refer to this fact sheet for more straightforward explanations.
Here's a summary of the standards' key requirements for your business:

- Evaluate employee exposure to respirable crystalline silica over an eight-hour day.
- Protect employees from respirable crystalline silica exposures over the permissible exposure limit (PEL) of 50 µg/m³, averaged over eight hours.
- Implement safer techniques and dust controls to reduce silica exposure.
- Provide employees with respirators when controls are not effective in reducing employee exposure below the PEL.

- Restrict employee access to areas where they may be exposed to respirable crystalline silica above the PEL.
- Prohibit the use of housekeeping methods that create airborne silica dust, such as dry sweeping and brushing and using compressed air, if feasible. Use methods such as wet sweeping or HEPA-filtered vacuums to remove dust instead.
- Write an exposure control plan.
- Offer medical examinations every three years to workers at or over the action level for at least 30 days a year. Keep records of the results of those medical examinations and employee exposure assessments.
- Train employees on work operations that result in exposure to crystalline silica and control methods that should be used to reduce exposure.

Many businesses in the industry are still working toward compliance. You may have concerns about whether your company is ready for these rules and what other steps you should take.

Pinnacol's industrial hygienists can assist policyholders in evaluating respirable crystalline silica exposure at your worksite. Contact us at safetyoncall@pinnacol.com or 303.361.4700.

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