

HAND INJURY PREVENTION

by Peggy Larsen

Regardless of the job, we use our hands for something practically every minute of every working hour. Among other things our hands can be cut, bruised, punctured, fractured and burned. This can occur during the course of work, at home and during recreation. By recognizing hazards, using personal protective wear and following established safety rules and procedures, you can save your hands from injury and yourself from an unnecessary disability.

Consider the following items in your daily activities to help prevent and minimize the extent of hand injuries.

Protection

There are times when it can be unsafe to wear gloves, such as when working with machinery with exposed moving parts. However, there are many activities where using a proper glove will prevent an injury or at least minimize the severity of the injury.

- When involved in material handling activities, take the time to put on a good pair of leather gloves. Rough or sharp edges, burns, protruding bolts and wood splinters can all cause minor to severe lacerations and punctures without the use of gloves.
- Prior to handling chemicals, read the material safety data sheet (MSDS) to know what, if any protection is needed, and follow the instructions. For example, if butyl rubber gloves are recommended, then butyl rubber gloves should be used. Substituting regular rubber gloves, unless recommended, could prove disastrous. If unsure as to the proper protection, ask your supervisor.
- When handling hot or extremely cold materials, a proper thermally protected glove should be used to prevent burns.
- If handling glass or metal with very sharp edges or if involved in cutting materials, perhaps a cut resistant glove would be best.

The Right Tool

We have likely been in a situation where we were in a hurry and grabbed the nearest tool or object to get the job done, even though it was not the proper tool needed - a wrench for a hammer, a screwdriver for a chisel, or a pocketknife for a utility knife, etc. Take the time to find the right tool for the job. In addition to using the right tool, keep tools and equipment in good repair and maintain sharp cutting blades.

- Periodically inspect tools for cracks, wear and proper function.
- Repair or replace worn or cut power cords. Tools such as sockets and wrenches that are worn should be replaced to prevent slippage.
- Dull utility knives or saw blades take more effort and force to cut the material. This can only spell trouble if there is a slip or a kick back.
- Keep blades sharp! Don't use broken tools!

Safeguards

- When working with machinery, make sure all guards are in place and properly adjusted. Never remove or circumvent guards as they are designed to protect you from coming into contact with potentially dangerous moving parts.
- Some machinery, such as presses and shears, are equipped with two hand actuation controls that are designed to keep your hands out of harm's way. These controls as well, should be used as designed and not bypassed in order to speed through work.
- Also remember where you put your hands. Not all moving parts on machinery can be guarded, especially at the point of operation. Don't inadvertently place your hand in a spot it shouldn't be!

Repetitive Strains

There are times when due to the force, frequency, hand position and static grip, hand strains are caused. Avoid such strains by considering the following:

- Periodically change your grip and wrist position.
- Take mini-breaks for periodic hand, finger and wrist stretches.
- Utilize tools with a properly designed ergonomic grip.
- Rotate job tasks.

Do's and Don'ts

- Do turn off power and do utilize lockout procedures where appropriate, especially when cleaning, repairing and inspecting machinery.
- Do use a push-stick when cutting on a table saw.
- Don't wear rings, watches or bracelets, especially around machinery.
- Don't grab dropped tools.

Focus

It only takes a small distraction when using a tool or piece of equipment to lose concentration on what you are doing and the next thing you know you've cut yourself or smacked your thumb with a hammer. Focus on what you are doing and don't let yourself become distracted. A good rule of thumb to follow is: when engaged in an activity involving tools or equipment, don't talk to anyone until you're done. By the same token, don't interrupt your co-workers when you can see they are involved in an activity that demands their full attention, wait until they are done! Concentrate on what you are doing. You can't afford the distraction!

Conclusion

Before you start a job, take a minute to think through the task. Ask yourself:

- What hazards are involved? (chemical, thermal, mechanical).
- What precautions need to be taken? (gloves, tools, push stick).

Then follow through and take no shortcuts.

Peggy Larsen is senior vice president of sales and marketing at Workers Compensation Fund. WCF offers ongoing safety training, and UHBA members are eligible for a 5% premium discount through a partnership with WCF. Visit www.wcgroup.com for more information