



ADVOCATE'S GATEWAY

Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW), Sudbury, Ontario

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WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR EMPLOYMENT ENDS: AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE

Many Ontarians are now faced with the decision to stay at their current job or to move on to something new. For some, this comes as a new opportunity or retirement; for others, this is not a choice as much as it is a necessity, whether it is because of a layoff or termination. Whatever the reason for leaving, there are a few things you should do to protect yourself in the event you develop health problems related to the job you are leaving.

You must first compile your complete personal file by obtaining copies of the company's records of any health and safety issues you may have faced. Your personal file should include copies of your company health records as well as any records of any incident forms or of any injuries you may have sustained while working. If you were ever injured at work, an injury report and a claim with the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) will have been filed. Have records of the names of supervisors and anyone else you dealt with during any incident. Examples of incidents include exposure to hazards, near misses or workplace violence or stress. You must also have copies of notes that detail plans for your return to work or any personal accommodations the company may have made. Ensure you have updated medical reports indicating any medical restrictions to the work you can perform. You will also want copies of your complete work history with the company, job descriptions, and physical

demands analysis for the jobs you performed.

Secondly, make a list of the hazards to which you were exposed. Hazards are physical (loud noises, heat, cold, vibration, etc.), biological (blood or other body fluids, fungi, mould, animal and bird droppings, etc.), ergonomic (improperly adjusted work station, frequent lifting, bending or kneeling, repetitive movements, etc.), and chemical (cleaning products, vapours or fumes, gases, solvents, etc.). Attempt to quantify your exposure to these hazards. Was your exposure daily, weekly, monthly, annually? Was the exposure intense or very minor? Material safety data sheets (MSDS) and industrial hygiene reports provide a wealth of information. Copies of these should be obtained before leaving.

Finally, you can request to see the company physician or your family physician for a complete medical/physical examination prior to leaving the company. If your job put you at risk for hearing loss, you should request a hearing test before or within 6 months of leaving. These will provide a baseline for your health and will provide you and your physician a health reference point with which you can compare. Many health problems like cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and heart disease require many years before they become symptomatic.

If you develop a disease that you believe may be related to your work, contact

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WHAT'S IN THAT NEW CAR SMELL?

If you bought yourself a car, would you expect to have a problem with it the moment you stepped in? It's no secret that the new car smell is a cultural symbol and source of pride for new vehicle owners, but lurking within that smell are airborne chemicals. Recent studies have shown that levels of airborne chemicals in new vehicles are much higher than what is normally allowed in terms of indoor air quality. This danger never fully goes away; although the new car smell fades and the chemical levels drop, heat buildup in the summertime can cause levels to rise again. New vehicles have been found to have nine times more airborne chemicals than used vehicles do under warm conditions, and poorly-maintained vehicles increase risk because emissions from exhaust can seep into the cabin.

Many materials are used to make cars, including fire retardants, glues, and upholstery. The car cabin is a confined space, and studies have shown that most of the compounds floating around have sources from the interior of the car on top of chemicals that enter from outside. Sealants, carpets, vinyl, leather, plastics and foam cushions are examples of sources of chemicals from the inside of the vehicle, while outside sources include emissions from incompletely-burnt fuel and roadway air penetrating into the cabin. Outside sources are related to traffic density; the more cars on the road, the higher the outside concentrations of airborne chemicals there will be, and the higher the levels will become in your vehicle. These chemicals particularly endanger children, the elderly, and people with asthma or other respiratory conditions. Researchers have also been able to link exposure in traffic to heart attacks that occur within an hour of driving.

So what chemicals are causing the problem? There are many, but the ones that contribute most are volatile organic compounds (VOCs), benzene, carbon monoxide (CO), and ozone. VOCs are carbon based chemicals that evaporate quickly into the air, and include formaldehyde, flame retardants, and chemical plastic softeners. Benzene is a natural part of crude oil that evaporates quickly at room temperature. Combustion, industrial processes, gas station vapours and cigarette smoke are all sources of benzene. Carbon monoxide (CO) is a lethal gas with no smell, taste or colour. CO attaches to red blood cells instead of oxygen, which causes cells to no longer carry oxygen. Moderate exposure may produce flu-like symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, and weakness in healthy people, and severe cases can result in death. Ozone is a three oxygen atom molecule that normally exists in the upper atmosphere. At ground-level, however, it creates smog by reacting with VOCs and the sun. It is a product of combustion, and is extremely harmful to health with levels generally highest in

the summer time. This short list of chemicals can cause skin, eye, nose and throat irritation, cough, headache, and flu-like illnesses. Some can cause blood and bone disorders, cancers, and birth defects with long periods of exposure.

For these chemicals, exposure is the sum of all of the exposures a person has had over their lifetime to that chemical. Investigators from the Ecology Centre in the United States found a 90 minute drive is equal to the chemical exposure of 8 hours in a typical work environment. Manufacturers are starting to catch on to the idea of selling healthier cars: Japanese manufacturers were the first to set an industry-wide goal of reducing VOCs in passenger compartments, and Toyota, Nissan, Honda, Mitsubishi, and Mazda already have cars on the market with lower VOC levels as a key selling point.

There are other actions that individuals can take to protect themselves. Naturally, the simplest solution is to drive as little as possible. Take the bus, ride a bike, walk, or car-pool to reduce emissions by reducing the number of vehicles on the road. If you must drive, avoid congested roads and try not to drive behind high-polluting vehicles such as older-model cars, SUVs, diesel vehicles, and out-of-tune vehicles with visible exhaust. Since levels of in-car pollutants increase in the summer due to higher temperatures, it makes sense to take action. Buy a reflective windshield sunshade, and use it. You may also consider buying window "vent visors." These are wind and rain deflectors installed at the top of your driver and passenger windows, so you can leave your windows slightly open. This effectively reduces the overall temperature in your vehicle without having to worry about the weather. Before getting in to your car, air the vehicle out by opening windows and/or turning on the air conditioning to blow out all the stale, hot air. You can also reduce chemical levels inside by driving with the driver's window rolled down half way on uncongested roads. Buying cars that are older (such as imports or previous-year models) can reduce the initial chemical levels, because the time delay allows the chemicals to disperse; the best advice is to make sure the car interior is well ventilated during the first six months of ownership, including bringing fresh air in to circulate, or driving with the windows down. It is also very important to keep your vehicle well-maintained.

Of course, there are also actions that can be taken on the national and global levels. Manufacturers need to be more careful when selecting materials, and more precautions need be taken when processing those materials. Consumers need to begin demanding that car manufacturers take necessary steps to reduce or eliminate these chemicals

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WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR EMPLOYMENT ENDS: AN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PERSPECTIVE CONT'D

the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers (www.ohcow.on.ca), your union or the Office of the Worker Advisor (www.owa.gov.on.ca) for advice.

For more information on this topic, you can contact the Ontario Federation of Labour (www.ofl.ca), visit www.worksmartontario.gov.on.ca or you can contact the Occupational Health Clinic for Ontario Workers nearest you.

A special thank you to Al Bieksta, ODRT Training Co-Ordinator with the OFL for his resources and input on this article.

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WHAT'S IN THAT NEW CAR SMELL? - CONT'D

where possible. Governments can assist by creating policies and legislation for safe vehicle manufacturing, and by providing incentives to companies producing zero-emission vehicles. Increased government spending on public transit, rather than on road construction and widening, would also help the global picture. Bigger roads only bring more cars; by riding transit, emissions are reduced in terms of numbers of vehicles on the road, and fewer vehicles also means fewer repairs to existing roads due to wear. Finally, governments must take action through green incentives, both for businesses and the public. They can increase tax breaks for those tak-

ing public transportation and reduce the number of tax incentives for driving, such as tax credits for parking. Working together, we can create a greener, safer way of traveling for everyone.

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ARE ECO BAGS CAUSING WORKERS REPETITIVE STRAIN INJURIES?

OHCOW was recently invited to visit a grocery store that has experienced a near tripling of elbow and shoulder pain amongst its cashiers. The issues were that the environmentally friendly grocery bags are taller than your typical plastic grocery bag. The bags are being placed on the rollers and counter making the top of the bags much higher than normal. This begins to place increased stress on the muscles of the shoulders and elbows since the workers

now have to reach higher in order to place the items into the grocery bags.

As a result, grocery stores need to be aware of the fact that these environmentally friendly bags can pose an increased risk of developing musculoskeletal disorders amongst cashiers and that modifications need to be made to the existing checkout stands to prevent workers from getting in-

OHCOW FILE REVIEW UPDATES

Did OHCOW provide a report or information (hygiene, ergonomic or medical) for your client? Do you know if the case won or lost? We are always striving to improve our services; therefore, we want to know if OHCOW assisted with a file whether it won or lost. The outcome is very important to OHCOW, you, and the workers you represent. This will allow us to maintain high standards while providing quality reports and information for you and your clients. Please send file updates by email at Sudbury@ohcow.on.ca or via fax (705)523-2606. To maintain confidentiality, we ask that you leave out the client's name unless you have a signed consent. Thank you for your help.

WHY DO THIS NEWSLETTER....?

In our catchment area, we are hearing from many advocates that they are feeling isolated. In providing this newsletter, OHCOW is striving to reduce this isolation, and enhance communication networks amongst advocates and OHCOW. It is hoped that OHCOW can provide more support to each advocate by providing up-to-date information.

OHCOW — WHO WE ARE? HOW & WHO CAN WE HELP?

OHCOW is a valuable occupational health related resource that is available to your members at no cost. The Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW)

We're on the web!
<http://www.ohcow.on.ca/clinics/sudbury/>

were established in 1989 and are funded by the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). There are clinics in Hamilton, Toronto, Sarnia, Windsor and Sudbury. Staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of specially trained occupational health doc-

tors, occupational health nurses, occupational hygienists, ergonomists, researchers, and administrators, each OHCOW clinic provides comprehensive occupational health services and information. Our mandate is the prevention of occupational illnesses and injuries. We do this through the

identification of the causes which have led to illnesses and injuries. This also provides us with a window into the work place.

In order to carry out our work we partner with, among others, public health officials; universities; the Ministry of Labour; the Ministry of Health; the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB); and organizations such as cancer coalitions. OHCOW works with medical and nursing schools to, provide occupational education to medical and nursing students. We also work with unions holding clinics for workers about illnesses which they think might be work related. In short, we have the experience, the knowledge and the credibility to assist you.

OHCOW SUDBURY WEBSITE

Did you know that OHCOW Sudbury updates its website on a monthly basis? Each month features a new article written by an OHCOW staff member on current issues within occupational health and safety.

studies, research projects, staff biographies, games & tests, past articles on health and safety issues, and information on education seminars that OHCOW offers.

Check it out!!!

The website also contains information regarding past case

<http://www.ohcow.on.ca/clinics/sudbury>

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We welcome feedback for generating topics that would be of interest to advocates. Please forward any questions or suggested topics to covered in future issues either by e-mail, phone or fax by using the contact information below.

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Occupational Health
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 Workers Inc.

Centres de santé
 des travailleurs (ses)
 de l'Ontario Inc.