
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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New tool helps protect Ontario construction workers from lung disease

Toronto, Ontario — Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers has introduced a tool that will help protect workers from lung disease caused by inhaling the dust of crystalline silica, which is found in sand, rock, gravel, concrete, brick, stone, mortar, granite, glass, ceramics and many other materials.

Carex Canada estimates that 429,000 Canadian workers are exposed to crystalline silica. As a result, occupational health experts say they are witnessing an increase in lung disease, including silicosis, bronchitis, emphysema and lung cancer. The Occupational Cancer Research Centre estimates roughly 200 Ontario construction workers are diagnosed with lung cancer caused by crystalline silica exposure every year.

The Silica Control Tool uses data about work conditions to estimate the amount of silica being produced, and then generates a plan to reduce exposure, so the worker can finish the job safely. The program that powers the tool is based on existing data from other users—the more people that use it, the better it works.

“We have learned that silica can be harmful to workers, and the impacts can even be fatal, but the good news is that we can do something about it,” says Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Executive Director, Kimberly O’Connell. “The Silica Control Tool will make it easy to create healthier working conditions and protect workers from lung disease. We are incredibly proud to be part of this groundbreaking project.”

The tool was developed by the British Columbia Construction Safety Alliance (BCCSA) in 2017 and it was met with such positive results that Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) has brought it to Ontario after a successful pilot program and as one of the projects of the Occupational Illness Prevention Steering Committee.

Both organizations hope that the Silica Control Tool will be used nationally, but it will be especially helpful here in Ontario, where the exposure limit for crystalline silica is about twice that of most other provinces.

The Silica Control Tool is based on best practice rather than compliance, but O’Connell hopes that workers and workplaces will embrace the simplicity of it. The industry is made up of many small construction companies that do not have access to occupational hygiene expertise to conduct traditional exposure measurements in their quick-changing mobile worksites. “The idea is to tap into the existing data to help protect workers,” O’Connell says.

“Launching this tool today showcases the impact that our health and safety system can have when it comes together to develop solutions for challenges that workers face every day,” says Dr. Joel Moody, Chief Prevention Officer/Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. “The Silica Control Tool will help empower employers and workers—from workplaces and operations of all sizes—to understand the hazards and prevention strategies related to working with silica. I want to recognize and thank OHCOW for their leadership to make this project happen.”

You can access and learn more about the Silica Control Tool at:
ohcow.on.ca/occupational-illness/silica-control-tool-ontario

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Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers are dedicated to the detection, prevention and elimination of occupational disease, injuries and illnesses, and the promotion of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being for all workers. At the core of each clinic is a dedicated staff trained in occupational medicine, who are available to provide medical examinations for a full range of work-related illnesses.

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