

examinetics

Occupational Health Pathfinder

Fire safety

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Overview

Of all workplace fatalities that occurred in the US in 2007, 3% were caused by fire and explosion (Dept of Labor *Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries Charts, 2007*). Not only does the effect of fire impact on the health and safety of employees and others associated with the business but also to the organization as a whole, damaging property, equipment and the daily operation of the business.

Fire safety

Employers should address three areas in fire safety (1) fire prevention, (2) emergency procedures in case of fire and (3) the protection of workers who fight fires and work with portable fire extinguishers. Fire prevention involves routine inspection of the workplace to assess potential fire hazards; eg ensuring that flammable liquids are stored safely and that electrical systems are not overloaded. General safe work practices help prevent inadvertent fire risk; eg ensuring that workshop areas are clear from combustible dust or volatile liquids on a regular basis. Communication of fire prevention measures to all employees is essential.

Clear evacuation procedures should be in place in case of fire. All evacuation routes should be unobstructed and fire exits (means of egress) unlocked at all times. Employers must comply with standards associated with design and construction of exit routes and the maintenance, safeguards, and operational features for exit routes. Most workplaces must have an alarm or signal system to warn workers in the event of fire. An emergency action plan is required by higher risk businesses that deal with particular flammable materials, explosive substances or hazardous wastes.

Employers have the choice as to whether there should be a complete evacuation in the event of fire or to allow employees to hold fire-fighting responsibilities. Obviously, this decision is a critical one and should not be taken lightly. There are strict fire safety standards that apply and so employers are advised to check with the OSHA website (www.osha.gov).

Regulatory issues

There are a number of regulations that employers should be aware of in relation to fire safety and emergency evacuation. Issues for businesses are covered in the General Industry Standard (29 CFR 1910) except those in construction, shipyard employment, marine terminals and longshoring where specific standards apply. These standards represent the minimum requirements with regard to fire safety in the workplace. Employers are reminded that other standards (local, federal or state) may be stricter and controlling and so research is essential in this area.

KEY BRIEFING POINTS:

- In 2007, 3% of all workplace fatalities were caused by fire and explosion
- Fire is devastating – to employees, their families, and the business as a whole
- It is recommended that three key areas are addressed in fire safety:
 1. Fire precaution
 2. Emergency procedures
 3. Protection of workers with fire-fighting responsibilities
- Fire prevention involves a routine inspection of the place of work to assess potential fire hazards
- Safe working practices can reduce risk of fire hazard
- Communication of fire prevention measures is essential
- Evacuation procedures should be in place with strict adherence to the standards concerning exit routes
- Strict regulations apply to employees holding fire-fighting responsibilities. Employers should familiarize themselves with all OSHA regulations

FIND OUT MORE...

OSHA website

www.osha.gov/SLTC/firesafety/index.html

US Fire Administration

www.usfa.dhs.gov/

Building and Fire Research laboratory

www.bfrl.nist.gov/

Fire Technology (Journal)

www.springerlink.com/content/106597

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Business Owner Briefing OSHA Fire Safety Advisor (eTool)

www.dol.gov/elaws/fire.htm

Medical Director Review

"How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuations" (OSHA)
www.osha.gov/Publications/osha3088.pdf

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