

OSHA FactSheet

Planning and Responding to Workplace Emergencies

Nobody expects an emergency or disaster. Yet emergencies and disasters can strike anyone, anytime, anywhere. Employers should establish effective safety and health management systems and prepare their workers to handle emergencies before they arise.

Planning

Where required by some Occupational Safety and Health Administration standards, firms with more than 10 employees must have a written emergency action plan; smaller companies may communicate their plans orally. Top management support and the commitment and involvement of all employees are essential to an effective emergency action plan.

Employers should review plans with employees when initially put in place and re-evaluate and amend the plan periodically whenever the plan itself, or employee responsibilities, change. Emergency procedures, including the handling of any toxic chemicals, should include:

- Escape procedures and escape route assignments.
- Special procedures for employees who perform or shut down critical plant operations.
- Systems to account for all employees after evacuation and for information about the plan.
- Rescue and medical duties for employees who perform them.
- Means for reporting fires and other emergencies.

Chain of Command

The employer should designate an emergency response coordinator and a backup coordinator. The coordinator may be responsible for plant-wide operations, public information and ensuring that outside aid is called. Having a backup coordinator ensures that a trained person is always available. Employees should know who the designated coordinator is. Duties of the coordinator and employer include:

- Determining what emergencies may occur and seeing that emergency procedures are developed to address each situation.

- Directing all emergency activities including evacuation of personnel.
- Ensuring that outside emergency services are notified when necessary.
- Directing the shutdown of plant operations when necessary.

Emergency Response Teams

Emergency response team members should be thoroughly trained for potential crises and physically capable of carrying out their duties. Team members need to know about toxic hazards in the workplace and be able to judge when to evacuate personnel or when to rely on outside help (e.g., when a fire is too large to handle). One or more teams must be trained in:

- Use of various types of fire extinguishers.
- First aid, including cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA).
- Requirements of the OSHA bloodborne pathogens standard.
- Shutdown procedures.
- Chemical spill control procedures.
- Search and emergency rescue procedures.
- Hazardous materials emergency response.

Response Activities

Effective emergency communication is vital. An alternate area for a communications center other than management offices should be established in the plans, and the emergency response coordinator should operate from this center. Management should provide emergency alarms and ensure that employees know how to report emergencies. An updated list of key personnel and off-duty telephone numbers should be maintained.

Accounting for personnel following evacuation is critical. A person in the control center should notify police or emergency response team members of persons believed missing.

Effective security procedures can prevent unauthorized access and protect vital records and equipment. Duplicate records of essential accounting files, legal documents and lists of employee relatives – to be notified in case of emergency – can be kept at off-site locations.

Training

Every employee needs to know details of the emergency action plan, including evacuation plans, alarm systems, reporting procedures for personnel, shutdown procedures, and types of potential emergencies. Any special hazards, such as flammable materials, toxic chemicals, radioactive sources or water-reactive substances, should be discussed with employees. Drills should be held at random intervals, at least annually, and should include outside police and fire authorities.

Training must be conducted at least annually and when employees are hired or when their job changes. Additional training is needed when new equipment, materials or processes are introduced, when the layout or design of the facility changes, when procedures have been updated or revised, or when exercises show that employee performance is inadequate.

Personal Protection

Employees exposed to or near accidental chemical splashes, falling objects, flying particles,

unknown atmospheres with inadequate oxygen or toxic gases, fires, live electrical wiring, or similar emergencies need appropriate personal protective equipment.

Medical Assistance

First aid must be available within 3 to 4 minutes of an emergency. Worksites more than 3 to 4 minutes from an infirmary, clinic, or hospital should have at least one person on-site trained in first aid (available all shifts), have medical personnel readily available for advice and consultation, and develop written emergency medical procedures.

It is essential that first aid supplies are available to the trained first aid providers, that emergency phone numbers are placed in conspicuous places near or on telephones, and prearranged ambulance services for any emergency are available. It may help to coordinate an emergency action plan with the outsider responders such as the fire department, hospital emergency room, EMS providers and local HAZMAT teams.

Further Information

More detailed information on workplace emergencies is provided in “How to Plan for Workplace Emergencies and Evacuations” (OSHA 3088) available free on OSHA’s website or from OSHA Publications, Room N3101, 200 Constitution Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210, telephone 1-800-321-OSHA, or local OSHA offices. Further information is also available in OSHA’s Evacuation Plans and Procedure eTool and Emergency Preparedness and Response webpage

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This information will be made available to sensory impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999; teletypewriter (TTY) number: (877) 889-5627.

