

NEWS



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OSHA ANNOUNCES EMERGENCY MEASURES TO PROTECT WORKERS FROM VINYL CHLORIDE

The Department of Labor announced today it will issue an emergency temporary health standard to protect workers exposed to vinyl chloride while it proceeds with normal rulemaking procedures for a permanent standard.

Assistant Secretary of Labor John H. Stender, head of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), said the emergency standard will reduce permissible exposure levels of workers in industry from 500 parts per million (ppm) in air to a 50 ppm ceiling, and at the same time require workplace monitoring and, where exposure is greater than the 50 level, personal protective measures and equipment.

The move followed disclosure by officials of the B.F. Goodrich Chemical Co. plant in Louisville, Ky., of a possible connection between vinyl chloride exposure and the deaths of four employees of angiosarcoma—a rare form of liver cancer. One additional death subsequently has been reported from Louisville, and one each from Union Carbide's South Charleston plant and Goodyear's Niagara plant. In addition, two present employees at the Louisville facility have been diagnosed to have angiosarcoma of the liver.

Under the law, the emergency temporary standard serves as a proposed permanent standard. Stender said a proposed permanent standard also would be based on recommendations which have been published by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

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This proposed permanent standard would establish methods of monitoring work areas for vinyl chloride, set work practices to be followed, institute a medical surveillance program for employees, and require specific personal protective equipment.

It also would prohibit any exposure to vinyl chloride, a substance that is used widely in the manufacture of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), a type of plastic. (Monitoring devices currently available can measure exposures as low as one part per million in air.)

The emergency standard, to be published in the Federal Register soon, can remain in effect up to six months. It will be superseded, however, as soon as the permanent standard proposal is adopted.

Stender said that "theoretically, the permanent standard can be on the books as early as June."

"Meanwhile," he continued, "the emergency standard will serve to protect workers from the grave danger we know exists."

Following the report from E.P. Goodrich, OSHA held an emergency fact-finding hearing Feb. 15. Later, Stender and other high OSHA officials visited several chemical plants for on-the-spot investigations to determine possible means of limiting worker exposure to vinyl chloride.

Stender said scientific evidence presented at the Feb. 15 hearing by Professor Cesare Maltoni, an Italian scientist, led to the emergency ceiling reduction. Maltoni's studies demonstrated that reduction from 500 to 50 ppm provides a considerable degree of protection from the 250 ppm concentration observed by Maltoni to be cancer-causing in animals, while those exposed only to 50 ppm showed no apparent ill effects.

Stender's visits and meetings followed a field study by a team of OSHA industrial hygienists and chemical engineers at a number of chemical plants in Louisiana to develop technical recommendations.

Although the emergency standard will become effective shortly after publication in the Federal Register, the permanent standard will not be adopted until the public has been given an opportunity to comment and, if requested, a public hearing is held.

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