

Vinyl chloride called unsafe at any level

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There is probably no "safe" level of exposure to vinyl-chloride vapors, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has told the state Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA).

"We reject the concept of a threshold limit for vinyl-chloride gas in the air," national job-safety officials said in a letter to OSHA this week.

"Consequently . . . where any employee is exposed to measurable concentrations of vinyl chloride . . . he (should) wear an air supply respirator," the national agency recommended as part of a standard on vinyl chloride.

Meanwhile, there was grumbling among several industry spokesmen contacted about the report. The industry representatives said it would be difficult and, perhaps, impossible to meet a standard as low as a maximum exposure level of one part of vinyl chloride gas per million parts of air. They also contended that it is impossible to scientifically and continuously monitor levels that low.

However, the industry leaders declined to comment specifically on the recommendations and referred these inquiries to trade groups. A spokesman for the Manufacturing Chemists of America, one of the principal trade groups investigating the vinyl-chloride problem, was not available for comment.

The recommendations report to OSHA is the latest action by federal officials in a chain of events that has followed the January announcement by B.F. Goodrich Co. that four employees at its Louisville chemical facility died of the rare liver cancer, angiosarcoma.

The cancer was thought to be caused by exposure to vinyl chloride, which the company produces at the Bells Lane facility.

Since the January announcement, it has been found that one additional death of a plant worker was caused by angiosarcoma, and that two workers now have the disease.

Also, two other chemical plants have announced that one of their workers died of the same disease.

OSHA sets standards for work safety based on the advice of the national agency.

And in its recommendations to OSHA this week, the national report points out that industry recommended a standard of 50 parts of vinyl-chloride vapor per million parts of air.

The report said that although studies on rats have not produced cancer at the exposure levels asked by industry, it does not regard the tests as conclusive.

A Goodrich spokesman said workers at the Bells Lane plant who work in the vinyl-chloride operations wear air respirators when there is a danger the exposure level might exceed 50 parts per million.

He said the 270 employees in the section do not wear the respirators all the time.

A spokesman for OSHA said it will study the national agency recommendations along with the results of its own studies before deciding on a final standard.

He said agents from OSHA are in the field now gathering data on the exposure and possible protective measures.

Some 6,500 workers employed in 37 plants are potentially involved.

The national job-safety agency said it will issue within two weeks the recommended standards for monitoring the air in plant operations and the medical screening it thinks ought to be part of the standard.

The air monitoring it will recommend will pick up concentrations of one part per million.

This means that any time the concentration exceeds that level, workers will have to wear air respirators, under the national recommendation.

Dr. Herbert E. Christensen, deputy director for the national agency's office of research and standards development, said the recommendations deal only with the polymerization process of vinyl chloride.

Still to be decided, he said, are recommendations for the vinyl-chloride synthesis and the larger area of products made from polyvinyl chloride.

"We don't know (on those matters) yet," he said. "We don't have any information at the moment."

He said the recommendation is that OSHA expedite matters "to insure that the health of exposed workers is promptly and adequately safeguarded."

Meanwhile, The Wall Street Journal said today that AFL-CIO officials want an interim standard issued and enforced while OSHA debates what the permanent standard ought to be.

Without the interim measures, the labor officials say, workers are not protected while the standard-setting process moves forward.