

Prevention Connection



Safety resources to protect your world

Mystery containers — Labels matter

You've likely come across a mysterious food container in the back corner of your refrigerator. Opening it, you discover the barely distinguishable remains of leftovers from a restaurant you ate at...last month.

As is true with most organic materials, recognizing when they are spoiled or unsafe is relatively easy. It only takes a sniff. Identifying inorganic materials such as chemicals is not as easy. Chemicals often are colorless and odorless. If they're stored in a secondary container, and not the original packaging, their identities are even more difficult to determine.

Many workplaces use whatever is available to store inorganic materials, from a coffee can or Mason jar, to an old anti-freeze jug or Tupperware container. The Occupational Safety Health Administration (OSHA) allows this practice in the workplace only if the employees immediately use the containers' contents and have them under their control for the duration of their shift. Containers cannot be transferred to another employee or set aside to use the following day.

Frequently, that does not happen, and the mystery container is left on a workbench, machine, or shelf with other chemicals. There is a real danger when an employee has no guidance to determine what the contents are, whether they are usable, or whether they should be disposed of and by what method. Some chemicals react violently with others and emit toxic byproduct gases like chlorine and cyanide. Others are highly poisonous and can be absorbed through the skin or can cause serious harm if splashed in someone's eyes. Chemicals also have varying degrees of flammability, and contamination of lubricants and cooling fluids for machines and vehicles is common when stored in unlabeled containers.

OSHA states that all employees have the right to know the hazards of the materials they work with. To comply with OSHA standards, create a policy to deal with secondary containers in your workplace. The GHS is OSHA's system for standardizing the classification and labeling of chemicals, and can provide guidelines. If you want to use a secondary container beyond its immediate use, GHS requires that:

- It must be labeled with all the original hazard information from the primary container.
- Or, it must contain a general label with the appropriate pictogram, hazardous property, and name of the chemical. For example, a secondary container of acetone would state "flammable," have the pictogram of a flame, and the word "acetone" printed on the side.

Be aware that the implementation of a new Hazard Communication Standard is being introduced in phases through June 2016. Further interpretation of the standard may pose additional requirements on secondary container labeling in the future.

This bulletin is designed by SECURA Insurance to inform you of important safety measures that can prevent injuries and save you considerable business expense. Additional safety resources available at: secura.net/preventionconnection

