

Hazardous Material Warning Labels

Warning labels, found on all containers of hazardous materials, provide much of the information you need to know to use the material safely. While you can get the same information (and more) from a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS), only a warning label can tell you exactly which chemical is inside a particular container.

Labels are important because they are the first alert that there may be hazards associated with using the material found in the container. Understanding warning labels will help you handle and use the material properly and avoid potential health effects in your workplace. Making sure that hazardous materials are labeled is a responsibility that all employees must share. If you find a container with no label or a torn or unreadable label, tell your supervisor immediately. The one piece of information you need to protect yourself may be what is missing. Don't use or handle the material until you know for sure what it is!

The most important information on the label is the word that indicates how hazardous the material is. There are three levels of hazard wording. They are Danger, Warning, and Caution.

Danger – means it is the most hazardous kind of material.

Warning – is less hazardous than Danger, but more hazardous than Caution.

Caution – is the least hazardous rating.

It's important to understand that even materials labeled "Caution" can be harmful to your health, if you don't follow proper procedures. The label will also contain information about physical hazards, like if the material is flammable, explosive or corrosive. Health hazard information on the label will list such dangers that could be caused by inhalation, irritation to the eyes, burns to the skin or other ill health effects.

Warning labels may also tell you how to store and dispose of the material properly. The label may indicate precautions to take, such as how to clean up, what personal protective equipment to use, and how to handle a spill of the material. First aid instructions may include antidotes for poisons and what steps to take when someone is exposed to the material.

When health and safety is at stake, it pays to double check. Always read the label before you begin a job using a potentially hazardous material. Although you may have used the same material many times, the manufacturer may have changed the formula or the concentration. Avoid identifying materials by the label's color or design. If the label raises any questions in your mind about the material, read the MSDS or discuss it with your supervisor. If you transfer a hazardous material from the original container to a second container, and you will not use the material by the end of the workday, you will need to label the secondary container. The minimum information required is the identity of the hazardous material and appropriate hazard warnings.