

Being Prepared for a Medical Emergency in the Workplace

Part 1 - First Aid Kit

By

Deborah Bright

“So,” you ask, “What’s the big deal? Why in the world should I be concerned with being prepared to provide first aid in my shop? For small cuts and bruises, all of us – me, my employees, my customers – are all responsible adults who can manage to apply a bandage without any fancy training. If there’s an incident that results in a serious injury, or someone becomes very ill suddenly, I can just call 911, right? I have more important issues to deal with, and that’s why I pay taxes!”

Maybe you’re right. I’m sure that you have already reviewed the Occupational Safety and Health Standards (OSHA) 1910.151 to assure that your shop is in compliance. Maybe being prepared to deal with a medical emergency is not necessary. After all, anyone who was ever a Scout had first aid training - maybe even CPR - when they were kids. We all grew up learning from our moms about first aid. And, again, there’s always 9-1-1.

Even if the fates allow that there is never a life-threatening emergency at your work-place, sooner or later someone is going to have some minor injury. The degree to which your operations will be disrupted depends on the time and energy expended dealing with the injury. If it’s a minor paper-cut or a skinned knee, all you need is soap and water to cleanse the wound, and a band-aid, right? Well, there’s also the paperwork – you’ll have to document the incident to meet any OSHA, Worker’s Compensation, or liability requirements, but that’s a topic for another time.

A first aid kit doesn’t have to be expensive. You can purchase a basic, pre-assembled first aid kit at almost any pharmacy or department store, even hardware and sports stores. Many technical equipment and other industry catalogues carry first aid kits. I’ll attach a list of basics that you can use to select a kit or to assemble your own kit or you can find thousands of lists on-line. First aid kits are usually used for treating minor traumatic injuries: burns, cuts, abrasions, stings, splinters, sprains, and strains. You may identify other possible injuries that you might wish to be prepared for.

Maybe one kit is not sufficient to meet the needs of your workplace. Depending on the size of your operation, and the environment, you may need only one first aid kit, or you may need several. You may need a very simple first aid kit for the office staff, and a more extensive kit available to the staff wielding power tools, forklifts, hazardous chemicals and other potentially injurious items, and yet another type of kit in each of the company vehicles. After evaluating the hazards of your workplace, you may want to supplement the kit with additional supplies such as amputation preservation supplies or a burn kit. Consult the Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) for any special requirements for exposure to substances in use in your workplace.

A few important notes:

1. Do not include medications in your first aid kit. Aspirin and antibiotic ointment may seem innocuous items to provide, but you probably don't have a pharmacist's license so let's just avoid any liability issues by not going there at all. We already granted that your staff and customers are adults. They should be responsible for providing their own pharmaceutical needs. You might think a bottle of aspirin or a tube of antibiotic ointment may seem like a cheap benefit to provide, but do you want to be responsible for making sure that the storage conditions (temperature, humidity) are satisfactory, that the medication isn't beyond its expiration date, or that there is no contraindication to using it? No, of course not. If the first aid kit that you purchase contains medications, remove them before installing the kit.
2. Do not include latex gloves, bandages, or any other item containing latex. A person with a latex allergy may suffer life-threatening complications if latex is contacted.

Identify a good location for the first aid kit. It should be conspicuous and easily accessible to anyone, not locked up or hidden in a drawer or closet. You shouldn't require a ladder or a key to access it. One good location is by the fire extinguisher. Most pre-assembled kits can easily be mounted on the wall. Or perhaps a cabinet would meet your needs better. Just don't lock it, label it clearly, and be sure that it is within easy reach for all of your employees.

Okay! You're still with me, so apparently I've convinced you to at least think about having some band-aids, gauze and tape at the ready. Once you tack up that kit you'll have done your duty, right? Hmm... well, maybe, maybe not. Recognizing that supplies will be used, you will need to maintain the first aid kit. Now you're not too happy with me. You thought you could spend a few bucks, stick a kit on the wall, and be set for life. Sorry. But it's still not a big deal. Assign an employee the responsibility of checking the kit at least monthly. This might be the person who checks your fire extinguisher, if that's an employee, or perhaps the office manager who would also order the replacement supplies. One of the requirements of your kit is a list of minimum contents. Each month, or when it is known that the kit has been used, verify that the minimum supplies are present and accounted for. You might add a tag, not unlike the one on the fire extinguisher, to track when it's been checked - just a date and initials, not a huge time investment. It might be helpful to add a paper seal that's easily broken so you can tell at a glance that the kit has been opened.

Are you still with me? Oh, good. Just remember, having this first aid kit available is intended to save time and get your staff back to work quickly in the event of a minor emergency. You have your assignment – identify special requirements, determine how many kits you need, and get the kits installed. Don't forget to assign a staff member to maintaining the kits! Just one more thing to do – be sure that everyone knows where the first aid kits are, and that they are available for minor emergencies. Caution staff to alert someone if supplies are used so that they can be replaced promptly. You can easily incorporate this into your annual safety refresher for staff.

The ability to provide basic first aid care to your employees and visitors is like the insurance coverage you carry. You hope that you'll never need it, but if you ever do need it you're very happy to have made the investment.

Attachment 1: Basic First Aid Kit supply list

Attachment 2: Occupational Safety and Health Standards 1910.151

References:

OSHA code of federal regulation 29 CFR 1926.50(d)(1) On First Aid Kits and Supplies

OSHA code of federal regulation 29 CFR 1910.151 (c) Eye Wash and Eye Stations

American Heart Association (AHA): www.americanheart.org

American Red Cross (ARC): www.redcross.org

eMedicineHealth: http://www.emedicinehealth.com/first_aid_kits/page2_em.htm

Homeland Security: <http://www.ready.gov/america/getakit/firstaidkit.html>

<http://www.fema.gov/plan/prepare/firstaid.shtm>

Mayo Clinic: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/first-aid-kits/FA00067>

- **Part Number:** 1910
 - **Part Title:** Occupational Safety and Health Standards
 - **Subpart:** K
 - **Subpart Title:** Medical and First Aid
 - **Standard Number:** 1910.151
 - **Title:** Medical services and first aid.
 - **Appendix:** A
-

1910.151(a)

The employer shall ensure the ready availability of medical personnel for advice and consultation on matters of plant health.

1910.151(b)

In the absence of an infirmary, clinic, or hospital in near proximity to the workplace which is used for the treatment of all injured employees, a person or persons shall be adequately trained to render first aid. Adequate first aid supplies shall be readily available.

1910.151(c)

Where the eyes or body of any person may be exposed to injurious corrosive materials, suitable facilities for quick drenching or flushing of the eyes and body shall be provided within the work area for immediate emergency use.

[63 FR 33450, June 18, 1998]