

Oven Cleaners

Most oven cleaners contain a chemical called sodium hydroxide. Many of us know this chemical as “lye”. Oven cleaners can be used safely if certain precautions are taken. This alert will review the health effects of over-exposure to oven cleaners and the proper precautions to prevent over- exposure including personal protective equipment and work practices.

Health Effects of Overexposure:

Oven cleaners are extremely caustic and irritating. They can irritate and burn the mucous membrane of the **nose, throat, eyes and lungs**. Workers commonly report a “burning/redness” of the nose, throat and eyes when cleaning ovens. The cleaners have been known to cause permanent eye damage and nasal ulcers in overexposed workers. On the **skin**, oven cleaners can cause severe burns if not removed immediately.

Oven cleaners can reach high concentrations in the air when in use. High levels may irritate the lungs and cause coughing and shortness of breath. When concentrations of oven cleaner are very high, exposed workers can experience a build up of fluid in the lungs called pulmonary edema. Too much fluid in the lungs can cause death.

How Can Workers Protect Themselves:

There are three basic methods to protect yourself from overexposure to oven cleaner vapors and skin exposure:

- **Ventilation** - The goal is to reduce the concentration of oven cleaner vapors so that they do not cause irritation to eyes, skin and nose. To accomplish the goal, as much fresh air as possible should be brought into the area while application and cleaning are taking place. If at all possible, windows and doors should be opened when the oven cleaner is applied. A fan should be used to bring in as much fresh air as possible and another fan should be used to exhaust the vapors.

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- **Personal Protective Equipment** - The goal of personal protective equipment is to keep oven cleaner off your skin and to protect workers from vapors when ventilation is not adequate. Workers should wear goggles and gloves when applying oven cleaners and cleaning the oven. Gloves made of natural rubber, nitrile or polyvinyl chloride are protective. As much as possible cover exposed skin with long sleeve shirts and pants. When ventilation cannot be boosted as described above, workers should be given respirators with high efficiency particulate filters. Respirators should only be worn by those who are properly trained and medically approved to use them.
- **Work Practices** - When ventilation and personal protective equipment are not adequate, there are some measures that workers can take to reduce their exposure as follows:
 - *Immediately and thoroughly wash any oven cleaner off exposed skin with soap and water. Clothing that has been contaminated should be changed. Contaminated work clothes should be laundered separately from other family members' clothing.*
 - *Take frequent breaks outside during the entire application and cleaning process. For instance, once the oven cleaner is applied, leave the area and go outside if possible for approximately 15-20 minutes. Return to the cleaning for an additional 20 minutes and then leave the area again for a break. Repeat this process until the job is completed. This method will reduce irritating exposure and/or allow your nose, throat and lungs to recover from exposure.*
 - *Dispose of rags with oven cleaner in plastic bags that are removed from the area immediately.*

If you experience shortness of breath or coughing, leave the area immediately and seek medical attention. Also consult your healthcare provider if you experience skin burns or rashes.

If you want more information on other workplace hazards, call the AFT Occupational Health and Safety Program, 800-238-1133.