

Health and Safety Recommendations for Personnel Who Handle Human Remains

Employers and rescue or recovery workers face a variety of health hazards when handling, or working near, human remains. Individuals directly involved in recovery or other efforts that require the handling of human remains are susceptible to bloodborne viruses such as hepatitis and HIV, and bacteria that cause diarrheal diseases, such as shigella and salmonella.

General Precautions

The following precautionary measures can help employers and workers remain safe and healthy while handling human remains.

Personal Protective Equipment

- **Hand Protection.** When handling potentially infectious materials, use appropriate barrier protection including latex and nitrile gloves (powder-free latex gloves with reduced latex protein content can help avoid reaction to latex allergies). These gloves can be worn under heavy-duty gloves which will, in turn, protect the wearer from cuts, puncture wounds, or other injuries that break the skin (caused by sharp environmental debris or bone fragments). A combination of a cut-proof inner layer glove and a latex or similar outer layer is preferable.
- **Foot Protection.** Footwear should similarly protect against sharp debris.
- **Eye and Face Protection.** To protect your face from splashes of body fluids and fecal material, use a plastic face shield or a combination of eye protection (indirectly vented safety goggles are a good choice if available; safety glasses will only provide limited protection) and a surgical mask.

Hygiene

- Maintain hand hygiene to prevent transmission of diarrheal and other diseases from fecal materials on your hands. Wash your hands with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand cleaner immediately after you remove your gloves.

- Give prompt care to any wounds which occur during work with human remains, including immediate cleansing with soap and clean water. Rescue and recovery workers should be vaccinated against hepatitis B, and get a tetanus booster if indicated.
- Never wear personal Protective Equipment and underlying clothing if it is damaged or penetrated by body fluids.
- Ensure disinfection of vehicles and equipment.

Ergonomic Considerations

Lifting or moving heavy objects, particularly when done repetitively, can result in injuries to those involved. Human remains that have been in water for some time are likely to be even heavier than normal. Having more than one person involved in lifting the human remains will help to reduce the potential for injury. Using appropriate lifting techniques will also help to protect workers, as will the use of mechanical lifts or other devices when available.

Myths

- There is no direct risk of contagion or infectious disease from being near human remains for those who are not directly involved in recovery or other efforts that require handling the remains.
- Viruses associated with human remains (e.g., hepatitis B and C, HIV, various bacteria, etc.) do not pose a risk to someone walking nearby, nor do they cause significant environmental contamination.
- The smell of human decay is unpleasant; however, it does not create a public health hazard.

Additional Information

For more information on this, and other health-related issues affecting rescue and recovery workers, visit OSHA's Web site at www.osha.gov. More detailed guidance addressing this topic can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at www.cdc.gov.

Workers' Rights

Workers have the right to:

- Working conditions that do not pose a risk of serious harm.
- Receive information and training (in a language and vocabulary the worker understands) about workplace hazards, methods to prevent them, and the OSHA standards that apply to their workplace.
- Review records of work-related injuries and illnesses.

- File a complaint asking OSHA to inspect their workplace if they believe there is a serious hazard or that their employer is not following OSHA's rules. OSHA will keep all identities confidential.
- Exercise their rights under the law without retaliation, including reporting an injury or raising health and safety concerns with their employer or OSHA. If a worker has been retaliated against for using their rights, they must file a complaint with OSHA as soon as possible, but no later than 30 days.

For additional information on workers' rights, visit www.osha.gov/workers.

How to Contact OSHA

OSHA's mission is to assure America's workers have safe and healthful working conditions free from unlawful retaliation. For more information, visit www.osha.gov or call OSHA at 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), TTY 1-877-889-5627.

This is one in a series of informational fact sheets highlighting OSHA programs, policies or standards. It does not impose any new compliance requirements. For a comprehensive list of compliance requirements of OSHA standards or regulations, refer to Title 29 of the Code of Federal Regulations. This information will be made available to sensory-impaired individuals upon request. The voice phone is (202) 693-1999; teletypewriter (TTY) number: (877) 889-5627.

