

Safety Sense

A Health Risk You Cannot See, Smell Or Feel

(NAPSA)—Wiping your hands at work could expose you to lead, cadmium and other heavy metals at levels that exceed health guidelines.

Every day, millions of Americans working in manufacturing and industrial settings use laundered shop towels—the red, blue or white fabric towels that are so commonly seen in a worker's hand or pocket—as part of their daily tasks. The towels are delivered by launderers, used throughout the day, then collected, washed and sent out again for delivery to other companies.

Gradient, an environmental and risk science consulting firm, studied the amount of heavy metal residue found on laundered shop towels and discovered that metals remained on these towels after washing. Over time, exposure to these metals could result in various negative health effects, including cancer and reproductive problems.

The Gradient study, “Evaluation of Potential Exposure to Metals in Laundered Shop Towels,” commissioned by Kimberly-Clark Professional, analyzed results of laundered shop towels submitted by various manufacturing industries, including automotive, metal manufacturing, printing and transportation. Research confirms that 100 percent of the towels tested contained toxic heavy metals, with 26 heavy metals appearing in over 90 percent.

In the course of a day's work, the residue on shop towels may be transferred onto workers' unprotected hands as they use the towels. Workers can then transfer metals from their hands to their faces and mouths, and once heavy metals are on workers' faces, they may be swallowed.

Workers using the typical number of towels, 12 per day, may be



Workers who touch towels with their hands may unknowingly transfer heavy metal residue to their mouths.

exposed to levels exceeding U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), California EPA and ATSDR toxicity standards for lead, cadmium, antimony, beryllium, cobalt, copper and molybdenum.

The research found it unlikely that metals found in the tested towels could come from a single industry source. For instance, beryllium is not commonly used in manufacturing sites, but was present in a number of the towels.

Because workers cannot see, smell or feel heavy metal contaminants on “clean” laundered shop towels, they are not aware that the towels could contain elevated levels of heavy metals.

If workers must use laundered shop towels, they should take the following precautions:

- Always wash their hands after handling a shop towel, especially before eating.
- Avoid wiping their hands or face with a shop towel—even one that is laundered.
- Never take shop towels home for personal use or wash them with clothes at home.

For more information, visit www.thedirtontshop towels.com.