

Tech Article

Finding Clues In Chemical Labels



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- Industry: Infection Prevention



Hazard and Precautionary Statement



Pictogram and Signal Words

It's time to approach Sterile Processing with a meticulous mindset. While chemical labels are not fun to read, they contain essential information for ensuring safe and accurate use.

Detergents have minimal regulation in the U.S. as an FDA Class 1 Medical Device so the manufacturer has more leeway on label formatting and content. The product name may offer clues such as “Enzymatic” or “Neutral”. Use other sources including the product Safety Data Sheet to determine appropriate use.

An important clue on detergent chemical labels will help answer a question frequently posed by surveyors: “What is the IFU (instructions) for this detergent?” The surveyor may want to know if the technician can state the correct dosing, contact/soak time and temperature.

For most medical grade instrument detergents, the product label is the primary Instructions For Use (IFU). The chemical manufacturer should state basic instructions on the product label including dosing and correct temperature. If this vital information is minimal or missing, contact the manufacturer immediately before starting use of the product.

It may not be practical to read the tiny print on a label during a shift, so after a detergent is adopted for use, the label and technical guides from the manufacturer may be used and referenced for enlarged laminated wall charts and staff training.

With training and return demonstrations, technicians will feel confident using chemicals while avoiding the common error of referring to products as the “blue stuff”.

Chemical labels also offer important clues for safe use. Chemical manufacturers are required to provide safety information on the product label which may be in several different locations.

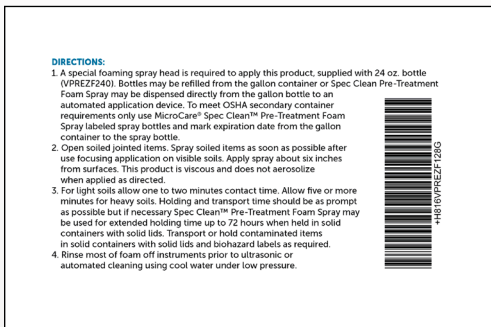
Look for three important clues to safety on product labels. First, look for a “Hazard and Precautionary Statements” section that will communicate precautions, protective equipment and what to do in the event of spills or splashes. Protective equipment is vital to prevent chemical exposures.

Next, look for Pictograms and Signal Words. Pictograms are diamond-shaped graphics outlined in red with a symbol inside and intended to help non-readers or language barriers. The Signal Word - Warning for lower risk or Danger for higher risk should appear near the pictogram. For example, if a detergent is classified as a mild irritant, the pictogram is an exclamation point with Warning as the Signal Word.

Some very low toxicity chemicals may not be required to show Pictograms or Signal Words on labels.

Third, look for the emergency 800 phone number in case of chemical exposures. This may be found with the Hazard statement or near the “How to Use” instructions.

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Instructions for Use (IFU)



Avoid costly mistakes...avoid referring to chemicals by color.

Follow the clues to safe use of chemicals on your product labels. Feel more confident about understanding pictograms with a quick training session using labels of products in use before the next inevitable chemical splash emergency.

In addition to finding important clues in chemical labels for the safe and proper usage, there are more clues in the chemical label for product management. The first clue is the Product Name. We may depend on color and container shape to verify the correct chemical, referring to our manual sink detergent as the “Green chemical”. The best practice is to stock and use chemicals by specific name, reducing dependence on color.

The same color can be used for multiple products and there is a trend to avoid dyes in chemicals.

Product expiration and lot number are also important clues. Expirations are printed on labels or stickers or directly stamped onto the container. Use stock rotation and double check expirations when restocking all chemicals used in Sterile Processing.

Another issue around product expiration may arise during survey visits. The surveyor may ask “How long is this product good for after opening the bottle?” The reason for this question is actually related to the correct use of high-level disinfectants such as OPA or glutaraldehydes. Opening a detergent or surface disinfectant container is unlikely to affect expiration. Detergents and surface disinfectants are usually “good” up to the expiration date marked on the container. If in doubt, check with the specific manufacturer of the product.

Following the clues on chemical labels by Material Supply Management and Sterile Processing teams will ensure fresh effective chemicals for cleaning and other applications.

About the Author:

Peggy Spitzer, AAS, BA, MA.Ed. is a Colorado native with over 30 years of combined experience as a healthcare provider, college faculty and clinic manager. As the clinical education manager at MicroCare Medical., a manufacturer of detergents and disinfectants for healthcare, she develops and presents education programs to hospital and dental professional groups focusing on infection prevention, instrument processing and best practices for chemicals. Peggy is a past president, secretary and treasurer of the Rocky Mountain Central Sterile Chapter promoting education and certification for Sterile Processing professionals.