SKILLSIGNAL™
Construction Safety & Compliance

TOOLBOX TALK

The Exclamation Mark: The Symbol on Everything, and Why That Isn't Permission to Ignore It

TOPIC NO.	DURATION	AUDIENCE
HC-11	10 to 15 min	All Crew

OSHA REFERENCE 29 CFR 1910.1200 Appendix A & C · 1910.1200 Appendix C.2.3 (Pictogram Precedence)

PROJECT / JOBSITE	DATE	PRESENTED BY

01 THE HOOK

START HERE

The exclamation mark is on the WD-40, the latex paint, the drywall mud, the dish soap in the trailer, and half the cans in the gang box. It is the most common pictogram on any site, and it means "this is the lower-level version of a hazard." Irritant, not corrosive. Harmful, not fatal. Makes you dizzy, not brain damage. That is exactly why people stop seeing it. But "lower level" is relative to the skull and the corrosion symbol, not to nothing. An exclamation-mark skin sensitizer can end your career in this trade just as surely as a health hazard one. The symbol is a volume knob. It is not a mute button.

02 WHAT THE SYMBOL COVERS

EXCLAMATION MARK

THE LESS-SEVERE CATEGORIES OF FIVE HAZARDS

Under **1910.1200 Appendix C**, the exclamation mark goes on: **acute toxicity Category 4** (“Harmful if swallowed / in contact with skin / if inhaled”), **skin irritation** Category 2 (“Causes skin irritation”), **eye irritation** Category 2A (“Causes serious eye irritation”), **skin sensitization** Category 1 (“May cause an allergic skin reaction”), **specific target organ toxicity, single exposure, Category 3** (“May cause respiratory irritation” / “May cause drowsiness or dizziness”), and **hazardous to the ozone layer**. Signal word is almost always **WARNING**.

03 SAME HAZARD, DIFFERENT FLOOR

EXCLAMATION MARK (LOWER LEVEL)	THE SEVERE VERSION
SKIN AND EYES **“Causes skin irritation.” “Causes serious eye irritation.” Red, itchy, sore. Reversible.**	SKIN AND EYES **Corrosion: “Causes severe skin burns and eye damage.” Tissue destroyed. Not reversible.**
POISONING Acute toxicity Category 4: “Harmful if swallowed.” It takes a lot. You get sick.	POISONING Skull: Categories 1 to 3. “Toxic” or “Fatal.” It takes a little. You may not recover.
BREATHING AND NERVES STOT single exposure Cat 3: “May cause respiratory irritation.” “May cause drowsiness or dizziness.”	BREATHING AND NERVES Health hazard: “Causes damage to organs.” Nervous system, liver, lungs, with lasting effect.
ALLERGY Skin sensitizer: “May cause an allergic skin reaction.” Rash on contact, forever, once sensitized.	ALLERGY Health hazard: respiratory sensitizer. Asthma on exposure, forever, once sensitized.

There is a rule in **Appendix C.2.3** that explains why you sometimes do not see the exclamation mark where you would expect it: **if the skull is on the label, the exclamation mark is not used for acute toxicity. If corrosion is on the label, it is not used for skin or eye irritation. If the health hazard is on for respiratory sensitization, it is not used for skin sensitization or irritation.** The worse symbol takes over. So an exclamation mark alone means the product did not rate the worse symbol for that effect. It does not mean it rated nothing.

04 THE FOUR THAT ACTUALLY HURT PEOPLE

HAZARD 1

SKIN SENSITIZER: THE RASH THAT NEVER LEAVES

Epoxy resins and hardeners, wet cement (chromium), some adhesives and sealants. The first dozen exposures do nothing. Then your immune system flags it, and every exposure after that gives you a rash, blisters, and cracked skin on the hands. Sensitized epoxy workers leave the trade. Gloves from day one, not from the day it starts itching.

HAZARD 2

DROWSINESS AND DIZZINESS: THE SOLVENT HIGH

Spray adhesives, contact cement, lacquer thinner, many aerosols, PVC cement. “May cause drowsiness or dizziness” means the vapor is a narcotic. In a closed room it makes you clumsy, then it makes you stupid, then it can stop your breathing. Clumsy on a ladder is how this one kills. “Use only outdoors or in a well-ventilated area.”

HAZARD 3

RESPIRATORY IRRITATION: THE COUGH YOU WORK THROUGH

Drywall dust compounds, cleaners with ammonia or bleach, some foam products. “May cause respiratory irritation.” The cough and burning are the airway telling you the dose is too high. Working through it is how it becomes bronchitis. Ventilate, or wear the respirator the SDS names.

HAZARD 4

HARMFUL IF SWALLOWED: THE LUNCH-TABLE DOSE

Category 4 oral toxicity is up to 2,000 mg/kg, which sounds like a lot until you add up a month of eating with unwashed hands. “Wash hands thoroughly after handling” and “Do not eat, drink, or smoke when using this product” are on nearly every exclamation-mark label for this reason.

⚠ **“IT’S JUST AN IRRITANT” IS THE SENTENCE BEFORE THE CAREER-ENDING RASH**

Skin sensitization is permanent. There is no cure, only avoidance, and avoidance in a trade that uses epoxy, cement, and adhesives every day means a new trade. The exclamation mark on the hardener is telling you this. The gloves it calls for cost two dollars. Wear them before you are sensitized, because afterward it is too late.

05 WHY IT MATTERS

[JOBSITE]

FOR THE CREW

Because the exclamation mark is on everything, it is where a crew's label-reading habit actually lives. A crew that reads the statement under the symbol wears gloves for epoxy and ventilates for contact cement. A crew that sees the symbol as background noise does neither.

[INDIVIDUAL]

FOR YOU

The hazards under this symbol are the ones most likely to actually happen to you this year. Not the fatal ones. The rash, the headache, the burning eyes, the dizziness on the ladder. Each one has a one-line fix on the label.

[HOME]

FOR LIFE OFF-SITE

Household cleaners, spray paint, adhesives, pool chemicals. Nearly everything under your sink has this symbol. The same two rules: ventilate, and wear gloves.

06 TODAY'S DRILL

TODAY'S DRILL **COUNT THE EXCLAMATION MARKS**

Open the gang box. Count every container with an exclamation mark. Then for the three you use most, read the actual hazard statement under the symbol out loud: irritant, sensitizer, drowsiness, harmful. For each one, name the single precaution that covers it (gloves, ventilation, or washing). If you have ever had a rash, headache, or dizziness from one of them, say so. That is the sensitization warning, and the crew should hear it.

07 CREW DISCUSSION

Take 2 minutes. Pick one.

1. Which exclamation-mark product do you use bare-handed? What does its label say about gloves?
2. Has anyone here had a rash from epoxy, cement, or an adhesive? Did it come back the next time?
3. Where on this site do people use spray adhesive, contact cement, or PVC cement in a closed space?

08 ATTENDANCE & SIGN-OFF

All attendees confirm they participated in this Toolbox Talk and understand the content covered.

NAME (PRINT)	SIGNATURE

SUPERVISOR SIGNATURE

_____ Date: _____

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