

NIOSH Recommended Exposure Limit Policy

In September, 1995, the Lead Team adopted a new policy that will guide NIOSH recommendations for limits on exposures to workplace hazards. This policy applies equally to chemical carcinogens and other health or safety hazards. As you know, NIOSH formerly had the policy of not recommending any exposure limit for carcinogens. Instead, NIOSH recommended "lowest feasible" or "no detectable" exposure to carcinogenic hazards. In recognition of the facts that such a recommendation did not serve the needs of regulatory agencies, which must establish a measurable exposure limit, and that the Occupational Safety and Health Act directs NIOSH to identify more than just "no risk" conditions, the following policy statement was adopted:

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For the past 20 plus years, NIOSH has subscribed to a carcinogen policy that was published in 1976 by Edward J. Fairchild, II, Associate Director for Cincinnati Operations, (Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci., 271:200-207) which called for "no detectable exposure levels for proven carcinogenic substances." This was in response to a generic OSHA rulemaking on carcinogens. Because of advances in science and in approaches to risk assessment and risk management, NIOSH is here adopting a more inclusive policy. NIOSH recommended exposure limits (REL) will be based on risk evaluations using human or animal health effects data, and on an assessment of what levels can be feasibly achieved by engineering controls and measured by analytical techniques. To the extent feasible, NIOSH will project not only a no-effect exposure, but also exposure levels at which there may be residual risks. This policy applies to all workplace hazards, including carcinogens, and is responsive to Section 20(a)(3) of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, which charges NIOSH to "...describe exposure levels that are safe for various periods of employment, including but not limited to the exposure levels at which no employee will suffer impaired health or functional capacities or diminished life expectancy as a result of his work experience."

The Lead Team and I believe that this new policy governing NIOSH recommendations for exposure limits, including exposure limits for carcinogens, will expand and enhance the impact of NIOSH recommendations. We believe this more comprehensive description of risks and the reality of the workplace will better serve all our customers, OSHA and MSHA, employers, and workers, by improving the quality of debate on working conditions.



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