

WEEKLY SAFETY TIP - 7/11/11 - WHAT'S MY SIGN?



Signs are important. They convey information – and sometimes very important information that might not be noticed without the sign. The sign you are looking at here is one you would see on the outside of a building, gate, facility, or aboveground storage tank. This sign tells you something – that there are specific hazards present for you to be aware of.

This sign was designed by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) to alert responding fire departments. But, you may not be a firefighter so why should you care? Because you might be a salesperson, a service technician, part of a construction crew, someone assigned to work in a facility that has this placard posted – or this placard might be posted at your site. And if you see it, you should want to know what hazards are there. Because we all remember the adage that what we don't know can hurt us.

Each of the smaller colored diamonds in this placard relates to specific types of hazards. The numbers tell you how hazardous the materials are, 4 being the highest, in a particular area. The numbers do not represent what the worst material at the site could be, but what is the worst case for each of the types of hazards represented by the colors. Following is a brief overview of the NFPA placard, and what types of hazards the colors, numbers and symbols represent.

Blue Diamond = Health Hazards. Inhalation hazards, Irritants and things that could make you very sick from a single exposure of up to one hour are listed here. If you see a 0, breathe easy – that means it is not hazardous to your health. The higher the number, the more hazardous it is. Sulfur Dioxide gets a 2. Ammonia gets a 3. Cyanide gets a 4. High numbers mean higher concerns.

Red Diamond = Fire Hazard. The NFPA rates this by how easily a fire could start, combined with how difficult it might be to put out that fire. Water would get a 0. Diesel Fuel gets a 2. Gasoline would get a 3. To rate a 4, like on our sign above, it would be a flammable gas, like Propane.

Yellow Diamond = Reactivity Hazard. This indicates how easily something releases energy, either by itself or when combined with water. Something as stable as Carbon Monoxide gets a 0. Sulfuric Acid would get a 2. Ammonium Nitrate (think Oklahoma City bombing) would only get a 3. TNT gets a 4.

White Diamond = Special Hazards. These are things that fall outside the other boxes or diamonds. They don't use numbers; symbols are used. OX means an oxidizer is present. ACID is self-explanatory. COR would be a corrosive, ALK would be an alkali, a trifoil is used for a radioactive material, and the symbol used above, the "W" with a slash is for something that is water reactive, like magnesium.

Two things to remember – ask to see an MSDS when you see numbers or symbols on NFPA placards. The NFPA system tells you there are hazards but does not tell you what the hazard is or how to protect yourself.

And, as we saw from the confused symbol used on the MSDS in the “What’s Wrong in This Picture?” from June 6 Safety Tip (Linked here if you didn’t see it: http://www.scm-safety.com/weekly_tips.html), if you are posting an NFPA placard, make sure you are putting correct information up to alert people to the hazards at your site.