

The logo for AFSCME Health & Safety Fact Sheet features the acronym 'AFSCME' in a large, bold, white sans-serif font. Below it, the words 'Health & Safety Fact Sheet' are written in a smaller, white, italicized sans-serif font. The text is set against a blue background with a green horizontal band at the bottom. To the right of the text is a stylized graphic of a star with several curved lines trailing behind it, suggesting motion or a starburst effect.

AFSCME

Health & Safety Fact Sheet

OSHA'S PROPOSED SILICA RULE: WHAT IT MEANS FOR AFSCME MEMBERS

Respirable crystalline silica – very small particles at least 100 times smaller than ordinary sand – is created during work operations involving stone, rock, concrete, brick, block, mortar, and industrial sand. Exposures to respirable crystalline silica can occur when cutting, sawing, grinding, drilling, and crushing these materials.

Breathing silica deep into the lungs can cause silicosis. With silicosis, silica particles lodge in the lung tissue, causing scarring. The lungs become less flexible, making it difficult to breathe and do hard work. Once silicosis develops, the damage is permanent. There is no recovery.

Every year, about 300 deaths are caused by silicosis.

Breathing silica dust can also cause lung cancer and increase the chance of developing tuberculosis. It is linked to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), and renal (kidney) failure. Since the medical treatments for silicosis and related diseases are limited, the BEST approach is to prevent exposures to silica.

AFSCME members working in any dusty environment where crystalline silica is present could be at risk of getting silicosis. Some examples of activities that pose the greatest risk of exposure to AFSCME members are:

- Highway maintenance and construction-including rock drilling, masonry work, jack hammering, excavations, and tunneling
- Crushing, loading , hauling and dumping of rock
- Sandblasting, or abrasive blasting with abrasive containing silica
- Stone cutting , including cutting, grinding, chipping
- Abrasive blasting of concrete, regardless of abrasive used
- Demolition of concrete or masonry structures

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is proposing two new crystalline silica standards: one for general industry and maritime, and the other for construction. The proposals are based on extensive review of scientific evidence, current industry consensus standards, and OSHA's outreach to stakeholders.

OSHA's current permissible exposure limits (PELs) for crystalline silica were adopted in 1971 and have not been updated. They do not adequately protect workers; they are outdated, inconsistent and hard to understand. The proposed rule is expected to prevent thousands of deaths and prevent 1,600 new cases of silicosis per year once the full effects of the rule are realized.

Workers' exposures would be limited to a new permissible exposure limit (PEL) of 50 micrograms of respirable crystalline silica per cubic meter of air ($\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$), averaged over an 8-hour day. The new PEL would be the same in all industries covered by the rule.

The proposed rule also includes provisions for measuring how much silica workers are exposed to, limiting workers' access to areas where silica exposures are high, using effective methods for reducing exposures, providing medical exams to workers with high silica exposures, and training for workers about silica-related hazards and how to limit exposure. These provisions are similar to industry consensus standards that many responsible employers have been using for years, and the technology to better protect workers is already widely available.

If the proposed rule becomes final, public employees in OSHA State plan states would be covered by the new standard. Twenty-one states and Puerto Rico have federally approved OSHA programs that cover public employees (AK, AZ, CA, HA, IN, IA, KY, MD, MI, MN, NV, NM, NC, OR, SC, TN, UT, VT, VA, WA, WY). Four states, (CT, IL, NJ, and NY) have federally approved state programs that apply only to state and local government workers. All public employees can use the information in the updated standard in training practices and safe operating procedures.

OSHA will be accepting written comments until January 17, 2014. Public hearings will be held in March in Washington, DC. After all the comments and testimony is reviewed, OSHA will determine if this much needed rule will be finalized.

Members can learn more about the proposed rule by visiting OSHA's Silica Rulemaking webpage at www.osha.gov/silica.

For more about silica, please visit the links below:

CalOSHA *etool*, Hazards of Silica in Construction:
<http://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/etools/08-019/index.htm>

CPWR's Working Safe with Silica:
<http://www.silica-safe.org/about>

OSHA Silica topics page:
<https://www.osha.gov/dsg/topics/silicacrystalline/index.html>

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH):
<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/silica/>

December 2013

For more information about protecting workers from workplace hazards, please contact the AFSCME Research & Collective Bargaining Department, Health and Safety Program at (202) 429-1215. You can also contact our office located at 1625 L Street, NW Washington, DC 20036.