

Use and Care with Compressed Air

A maintenance technician with a small cut on his hand washed some machine parts in a solvent. To dry them, he held the parts in a compressed air stream. A few minutes later he told his supervisor he "felt like his body was going to explode!"

With such unusual symptoms, the injured worker was rushed to a hospital. Doctors decided that the compressed air had penetrated the cut on his hand and had forced air bubbles into his blood stream. Although the mechanic recovered from his self-inflicted injury, his mistake could have been fatal if an air bubble had reached his heart.

Injuries caused by the misuse of compressed air have occurred since this energy source was developed. Compressed air is used so much that many of us take it for granted, ignoring the hazards involved in its use.

In addition to the danger of air bubbles entering the bloodstream through a cut, a stream of compressed air can damage an eardrum or eye or inflate a part of the body.

Many people blow dust and dirt from their clothing, body or hair with compressed air. Even if the pressure is as low as 20 to 25 psi, when directed toward openings in the skin or body, air can penetrate causing serious injuries.

To prevent accidental injury when working with compressed air, here are several precautions to follow:

- Avoid using compressed air for any type of cleaning.
- Before operating an air hose, examine all connections to make sure they are tight and won't come loose under pressure; hold the nozzle when turning air on or off.
- Don't kink the hose to stop the air flow; always turn off the air at the control valve.
- Check the air hose carefully to make sure it is in good condition before opening the valve to let air into the hose; when the job is finished, turn off the valves on both the tool and the air-line.
- Keep air hoses out of aisles where they can be damaged by traffic or be a tripping hazard.
- Never point a compressed air hose nozzle at any part of your body or at another person; never use compressed air for a practical joke. There have been cases in which a blast of air playfully directed behind a worker startled him, and caused him to fall against moving machinery.
- Before turning on the air pressure, ensure dirt from machinery being cleaned will not be blown onto other workers. To prevent dirt from flying about, cover equipment with canvas. Only the operator should be in the immediate area.

The operator and any other workers who must be in the immediate cleaning area must wear eye protection and other necessary personal protective equipment.

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