



Introduction

Asphalt is a strong adhesive used for road paving, roofing tar, roll-roofing, roofing felt, shingles, pipe covering, floor tile, waterproofing, and many other products and processes.

Asphalt is derived from crude oil and is dark brown or black. It may be a solid, a semi-solid, or a liquid. Other names for asphalt include road tar, road binder, mineral pitch, petroleum pitch, petroleum asphalt, and seal-coating material.

Asphalt is often mistakenly confused with “tar”, “coal tar,” or “pitch” because the appearance is similar and the substances may be used interchangeably in many industrial processes. Tar and pitch are derived from coal products that are chemically and physically different than the crude oil used in asphalt.

There are two main types of asphalt:

Straight-run asphalt, or asphalt cement - used for paving roads, airport runways, and parking lots. Because of its solid to semi-solid nature, it must first be “cut” with a solvent to bring it to a more liquid state; this is known as cut-back asphalt. Highway workers are most likely to use straight-run asphalt.

Air-blown asphalt, or oxidized asphalt - has a high softening point and is used primarily in roofing, pipe covering, and similar situations.

Millions of tons of asphalt are produced and used every year in the paving and roofing industries. Over a half-million workers are exposed to fumes from asphalt. Health effects from exposure to asphalt fumes can include headache, skin rash, sensitization, fatigue, reduced appetite, throat and eye irritation, cough, and skin cancer.

Hazards

There are two main hazards associated with asphalt”

- Fire and explosion hazards
- Health hazards associated with skin contact, eye contact, and/or inhalation to fumes and vapors
- Health hazards associated with skin contact, eye contact, and/or inhalation of fumes and vapors



Fire Prevention and Control

Because asphalt products are often stored and handled at elevated temperatures, fire protection is extremely important.

One of the greatest hazards in handling hot asphalt is exposure to a source of ignition. Sparks, electricity, open flames, incandescent material (lit cigarette), or other possible ignition sources should be prohibited or otherwise strictly controlled in the vicinity of asphalt operations.



Using an Asphalt Distributor

Asphalt applied while at temperatures above flash point is especially vulnerable to combustion. For example, applying a prime coat with a distributor involves using cut-back asphalt heated above its flash point. If a fire is initiated at the spray bar it may spread through accumulated asphalt deposits on the distributor chassis and destroy the vehicle. Therefore, asphalt distributors should be kept clean and free from asphalt accumulations.

Before spraying begins, the burners must be shut off. If practical, the hot parts of the burner should be permitted to cool.

Exterior parts of the distributor truck exhaust systems should be kept clean by wire brushing to remove debris that could ignite and fall in the path of the spray-bar.

When spraying is in progress, there is always the danger of a fire starting from a cigarette or match thrown down by a passerby. It is advisable to post a warning with the traffic signs indicating roadwork ahead and that spraying operations are underway.

A distributor spray-bar fire can be put out quickly if dealt with in the early stages. The spray-bar must be shut off at the earliest possible moment by closing the spray valve or, if necessary, by stopping the pump.

To help ensure success, the distributor crew should be trained to put out this kind of fire. Dry chemical or carbon dioxide extinguishers should be stored in the cleanest place on the vehicle, preferably in the cab. A second extinguisher should be available in case the first fails to operate.

Asphalt will combust if overheated in the presence of an adequate air (oxygen) supply. Some asphalt cements and air-blown asphalts are not combustible until heated above 232 °C (450 °F).

The combustibility of asphalt varies with the type and amount of solvent. Therefore, rapid-curing cut-backs are the most susceptible to combustion because their solvents have flash points near those of gasoline and naphtha. Medium-curing cut-backs contain solvent with a flash point near that of kerosene. Slow-curing cut-backs contain oil of lower volatility and a higher flash point as a solvent, and therefore these cut-backs are the least susceptible to combustion.

Asphalt cements and oxidized asphalts require heating to high temperatures for transfer and application. The resultant high temperature materials can cause severe burns, and precautions are necessary to prevent injury. Emulsified and cut-back asphalts may also be heated enough to cause severe burns on contact.



Personal Protective Equipment

PPE is necessary to protect workers from asphalt burns and irritation. In addition, many of the solvents used to cut asphalt can be absorbed through unprotected skin into the blood stream, where they can travel throughout the body and cause damage to many different organs.

PPE recommended when handling heated asphalt:

- Chemical goggles and a face shield [200mm (8 inches in size) at minimum]
- Loose clothing in good condition with collars closed and cuffs buttoned at the wrist
- Thermally insulated gloves with gauntlets that extend up the arm, worn loosely so that they can easily be flipped off if covered with hot asphalt
- Boots with tips at least 150mm (6 inches) high and laced without openings
- Pants without cuffs that extend over the tops of the boots
- Laced safety shoes at least 15 cm high
- Barrier creams and lotions leave a thin film on skin and act as a barrier against skin irritants worn with protective clothing
- Long handled sprayers with flexible hoses should be used when emulsified asphalts are applied by hand for track coats, or when cut-back asphalts are applied by hand for prime coats

First Aid

Whenever a person is injured from exposure to asphalt fumes, cold asphalt, or hot asphalt, obtain first aid/medical attention immediately. To prevent the possibility of future medical complications, have the victim examined by a physician even if the injury does not appear to be serious.

Asphalt Fumes

- Move victim to fresh air
- Administer oxygen if breathing is difficult
- Start artificial respiration if breathing stops
- Have victim examined by a physician

Cold Asphalt

- Remove cold asphalt from skin with waterless hand cleaner (warm mineral oil 43 °C [110 °F] can also be used)
- Wash skin thoroughly with soap and water
- Remove contaminated clothing and shower victim at once
- Flush out contaminants from eyes for at least 5 minutes with water, lifting upper and lower eyelids occasionally
- Have victim examined by a physician

Hot Asphalt

- Apply cold water or ice pack to asphalt skin burns
- If burns cover more than 10 percent of body (about equal to surface of one arm or one half of a leg)

apply lukewarm water, or warmer if needed to alleviate pain, but heat in the asphalt must be removed as rapidly as possible

- Do not remove asphalt from skin
- Do not bandage burn
- Have victim examined by a physician

Safe Work Procedures – Training

All workers who can be exposed to asphalt fumes should be trained on hazards that may be present and safe work procedures. This training should include specific information about the solvents used in mixing the asphalt.

Safety Data Sheets (SDS) should be made available to each employee assigned to work with or near asphalt processes. The SDS should include specific information on the solvents present in the asphalt mix and should list all pertinent information, including flashpoint, boiling point, acute and chronic effects of all chemical ingredients in the solution, recommended PPE, and fire and emergency cleanup information.

Engineering Controls

Substitution

The best method of controlling exposure to asphalt fumes and solvent vapors is to substitute a safer asphalt mix. If explosion hazards are a problem in a paving operation, MC-250 may be substituted for RC-250. The flashpoint of the mix will be nearly doubled, which means that the mix will be less likely to ignite.

If the toxicity of the chemical is a problem, the employer may be able to order an asphalt mixture that contains a less toxic solvent (for example, using toluene instead of benzene).

Enclosure

Enclosing the process where the asphalt is used is not possible in road paving and roofing operations. It may, however, be possible for smaller operations such as pipe covering processes.

Mechanization and Automation

Certain parts of asphalt processes may be mechanized. For example, stirring asphalt in a tar kettle exposes the worker to asphalt fumes, solvent vapors, and potentially severe burns; mechanical devices can accomplish this task without exposing the employee to such risks.

Local Exhaust Ventilation

Local exhaust ventilation may be an effective way to control worker exposure to fumes and vapors, particularly in areas where enclosure of the operations is impossible.

General Dilution Ventilation

General dilution ventilation involves flooding a work area with uncontaminated air to remove contaminants from the worker's breathing zone. The use of fans and blowers set up for this purpose, however, is often not adequate to remove the contaminants. This is generally not the most effective way of removing contaminants from the worker's breathing zone, but may be used to supplement local exhaust ventilation.

Respiratory Protection

While engineering controls are the preferred method for controlling worker exposure to fumes and vapors, respirators should be worn where this is not possible. In selecting the proper respirator, it is important to know all hazards to which workers may be exposed. For example, a NIOSH-approved dust respirator will control exposure to asphalt fumes, but will do nothing to protect the worker against exposure to toxic vapors given off by the solvent in the mix. In situations where vapors are concerned, the minimum requirement would be a full-face mask respirator with organic vapor and particulate cartridges. Because of the possibility of eye irritation, a half-face mask respirator would be inadequate.

Asphalt Safety Reminders

- When working with any asphaltic material, avoid prolonged inhalation of asphalt materials
- Wear PPE (heavy work gloves, old clothing, protective shoe, etc.) to protect against asphalt spatters
- When chipping or chiseling old blacktop, wear eye protection. Also, don't chisel with a carpenter's hammer, because it isn't designed for this type of job and may be damaged; use a hand drilling hammer or machinist's hammer
- Keep all asphalt materials away from high heat
- Keep solvent-thinned materials away from open flames
- Close containers after each use
- Always follow the manufacturer's instructions for the product being used

Review

1. What are some of the health risks from exposure to asphalt fumes?
 - a. Headache
 - b. Skin cancer
 - c. Reduced appetite
 - d. All of the above
2. Fire / Explosion and Health (skin contact, eye contact, and/or inhalation of fumes and vapors) are the two main hazards associated with asphalt. True / False
3. Why is it important to wear protective clothing when working with asphalt?
 - a. To protect from burns and irritation
 - b. To prevent solvents from being absorbed into the blood stream
 - c. All the above
4. What information must the SDS contain to protect the worker?
 - a. Acute and chronic effects of chemical ingredients.
 - b. Recommended PPE
 - c. Fire and emergency cleanup information
 - d. All of the above

Answers

1. D
2. True
3. C
4. D

For more information on asphalt safety and other hazard communication topics, see the Service Lloyds website. In Risk Control's Training Materials section, we have additional resources including:

- Chemical Safety & the SDS – Toolbox Talk
- Hazard Communication – Toolbox Talk
- Hand Protection – Chemical Exposure
- HazCom/GHS Program – Sample Safety Program

Remember to practice Safety; don't learn it by accident.

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