

Risk Insights

Advice for you and your business

Safe Handling of Oil and Solvent-Soaked Rags and Wiping Cloths



Wiping rags, waste, clothing or other absorbent materials soaked with oil, solvent, thinners, linseed oil or paint require special handling precautions to help reduce the risk of a fire.

● Spontaneous combustion

When materials are soaked with organic substances such as oils, spontaneous heating through oxidation can occur. When this happens, the temperature will continue to increase until spontaneous combustion occurs and the materials burst into flames.

● Controlling spontaneous combustion

Storing oil-soaked rags in specifically designed metal cans that safely contain a self-ignited fire can help to control the danger of spontaneous combustion. These containers are made of metal and have self-closing covers. They need to be elevated so that the heat from a fire within the container doesn't ignite a wooden floor or other combustibles under the container.

The risk of spontaneous combustion is virtually eliminated by limiting the oxygen in the container. The oxidation process will use up the oxygen in the container, thus stopping the reaction and helping to prevent a fire.

● Housekeeping

Good housekeeping is essential to helping prevent fires. Oil-soaked combustible materials are subject to being ignited by other sources such as welding sparks, cutting torch slag, grinding or discarded smoking materials. Oily waste cans placed at key locations can help minimize the fire hazard of soaked rags and should be emptied daily.

● Safety cans

Oily waste containers should bear the label of a recognized testing laboratory such as Underwriters Laboratories or Factory Mutual. The label will help ensure the product has been tested and certified to meet the high standards of safety and quality.

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