This Safety Information provides advice on actions that can be taken to reduce the risk of incidents involving fire and alcohol-based preparations.

**Alcohol Based Hand Cleansers and Fire**

Incidents involving fire and alcohol-based hand cleansers reported overseas have been attributed to not allowing the product to evaporate after application. The risk of ignition is extremely low compared with the risk to patient safety of healthcare workers with contaminated hands.

Educating staff on how to use alcohol-based hand cleansers – particularly on allowing the product to dry – is an important factor in reducing the risk of fire.

Alcohol-based hand cleansers are widely used in healthcare facilities for rapid hand hygiene. When used appropriately these products are very effective at reducing the number of viable micro-organisms on the hands. Alcohol solutions containing 60-95% alcohol are most effective in the clinical setting for reducing microbial activity. Such products have been shown to increase compliance with hand hygiene and reduce skin irritation and dryness.

Tens of seconds of hand rubbing are required for vapours to dissipate. Static electricity sparks may ignite residual vapours from alcohol-based hand cleansers, and the resultant flames may last for several tens of seconds. Flames will be more intense in oxygen-enriched environments.

Depending on the type and concentration of alcohol, the flashpoint of alcohol-based hand cleansers ranges from 21-24°C. These products should be stored away from high temperatures and flames.

**Steps to minimise risk**

- Alcohol-based hand cleansers should remain widely available in easy-to-access locations, such as near patient beds and nursing stations.
- Healthcare workers should be educated in the appropriate use of alcohol-based hand cleansers including storage, flash point, risk in oxygen-enriched environments, and the requirement to dry hands before proceeding with the next task.

**Further Reading**

- Clinical Excellence Commission, Clean Hands Saves Lives Campaign
- ERCI. Fire Risk from Alcohol-Based Hand Sanitizers Worsens in Oxygen-Enriched Environments, Health Devices Alerts, November 3 2006; Vol 30, No 44.

**Recommended actions by Area Health Services**

1. Forward information to appropriate area for action.
2. Ensure a system is in place to document actions taken.
This Safety Information provides advice on actions that can be taken to reduce the risk of incidents involving fire and alcohol based preparations.

**Alcohol Based Skin Preparations and Fire in the Operating Theatre**

In December 2006 and January 2007, respectively, Queensland Health and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services of the USA, Department of Health and Human Services recommended the adoption of fire risk reduction strategies when using alcohol-based skin preparations in the operating theatre.

Alcohol-based preparations are considered to be one of the most effective and rapid acting skin preparations but they are also flammable and can contribute to the risk of fire in the operating theatre, if used inappropriately.

Fires can occur when fuel, an oxidizer and an ignition source come together. All three elements are present in the operating theatre, for example, alcohol-based skin preparations, combined with the oxygen rich environment in the operating theatre, could ignite when exposed to a heat producing source such as a diathermy. While the operating theatre provides an environment conducive to the risk of fire, **such events are rare.**

On the other hand, **surgical site infections** pose a significant risk to patients. Hence, when considering the use of alcohol-based skin preparations in the operating theatre, there is a need to balance the risk of fire with the risk of surgical site infections.

If alcohol-based skin preparations are inappropriately applied, the solution may wick into the patient’s hair and linen or pool on the patient’s skin, resulting in a prolonged drying time. If the patient is then draped before the solution is completely dry the alcohol vapours can become trapped under the surgical drapes and be channelled to the surgical site.

**Steps to minimise risk**

The use of alcohol-based skin preparations in the operating theatre should be accompanied by appropriate fire risk reduction measures. These measures include:

- Use alcohol-based skin preparations with caution in the operating theatre.
- Do not use alcohol-based skin preparation prior to procedures involving or likely to involve electric cautery, laser or use of diathermy.
- Avoid run-off and pooling of alcohol-based skin preparations by using only the minimum amount of alcohol-based skin preparation necessary and allow the solution to completely dry prior to draping.
- Do not allow alcohol-based skin preparations to soak into the patient’s hair or linen.

**Further Reading**


Queensland Health, *Recommendations for Surgical Skin Antisepsis in Operating Theatres, December 2006*


USA Department of Health and Human Services, *Use of Alcohol-based Skin Preparations in Anaesthetizing Locations (Memorandum), 12 January 2007.*