OH&S | The Darkroom

Cleanliness in the darkroom is critical for your health; it's worth taking the time to learn how to avoid and / or cleanse yourself of any chemical contamination. Like all chemicals, those used in photography should be treated with respect and handled with extreme care. Even though precautions are printed on labels and instruction sheets, too many darkroom workers either ignore these warnings or proceed haphazardly.
Since most photographic chemicals pose no threat when used properly, disregarding the manufacturer's guideline is foolish.

Chemicals can enter the body in three ways;

1. Skin contamination
2. Inhalation of fumes and dust
3. Ingestion

Although the skin is a protective layer that usually keeps foreign elements from entering the body, it can also act like a sponge, absorbing liquids and powders.
Some people seem to have no immediate response to chemical contact, while others have allergic reactions. *However*, everyone will develop a toxic reaction if exposed to chemicals over a long period of time. One fairly common trigger for allergic reactions is Metol, a developing agent in some black-and-white developers. Varying degrees of exposure to Metol can result in contact dermatitis, a rash like condition that causes itching and scaling. A very small number of people experience symptoms when they are merely in the same room with this particular chemical, but remember of course that this is a rare occurrence. One solution is to use a phenidone-based developer that is non-allergic; these are found in many Ilford products such as the ones that are used in our darkroom.
Another method is to keep chemicals out of contact with your skin by wearing disposable surgical gloves, these are relatively inexpensive and are certainly worth using. Chemical splashes resulting from tray rocking or inadvertent spills can get on and soak through your clothing and even soft shoes. A protective apron and hard - topped shoes guard against this.

***Never work barefoot in the darkroom*.**

Also, fine sprays of chemicals can result when you move prints from tray to tray. If any chemical gets in your eyes, immediately flush them with water for 5 minutes and then call a physician. Follow the instructions on each chemical pack for additional first-aid information.
Keep in mind that airborne fumes can be as potentially dangerous as the chemicals

themselves. While your nose will guide you in many instances, you should pay attention to subtle fumes that can be harmful, if you find that your mood suddenly alters, or that you are having difficulty concentrating, go out of the darkroom and get some fresh air Because airborne particles can contaminate food and beverages, you shouldn't eat or drink in the darkroom. Whenever you finish working, check the entire darkroom area, wash the countertop, and carefully clean out the trays, and wipe down the chemical containers. As you do, watch out for precipitates that might have formed. Make sure that the stainless steel bench tops have no chemical residue on them as these will oxidize quite rapidly and release toxic fumes. With a little thought and protective maintenance, your darkroom will be a non-threatening environment. Read the warnings on labels, and follow them to the letter. In short, treat chemicals and your own body with respect.

Compiled and edited
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