

Workers Want to Ban Shop Towels That Retain Toxic Metals

In a survey recently released by [Kimberly-Clark Professional](#) [1], nearly four in five manufacturing workers agreed that shop towels should be banned if they are not 100 percent-free of hazardous materials after laundering. The survey exclusively targets production floor employees, and is representative of the millions of U.S. manufacturing workers who use shop towels every day, in industries such as automotive, aviation, printing, food and beverage processing, as well as metals and equipment manufacturing. [Harris Interactive](#) [2] conducted the survey online on Kimberly-Clark Professional's behalf from November 8 to 22, 2011, and it reflects responses from 263 U.S. manufacturing workers who spend at least 50 percent of their time on the production floor.

The results show that once the potential contamination risks of laundered shop towels are known, workers have near-universal agreement on the need to seriously address the issue. However, worker knowledge is limited, with only 44 percent of workers citing awareness of an exposure risk after shop towels are laundered.

"This survey demonstrates an urgent need to further educate manufacturing workers about shop towel safety issues," said Kim MacDougall, research scientist at Kimberly-Clark Professional. "Workers care deeply about their safety, and overwhelmingly express that shop towels delivered as clean should be free of any residual contaminants. Once fully informed of the safety issues surrounding shop towel contamination, workers will demand that these unnecessary risks be addressed in their workplace."

In a [2011 study conducted by Gradient](#) [3], an environmental and risk science consulting firm, which was sponsored by Kimberly-Clark Professional, toxic heavy metal residues were found on 100 percent of the laundered shop towels that were tested. Shop towels are routinely used in manufacturing to wipe machines, parts and equipment, then washed by industrial launderers for re-use at multiple facilities. Residues retained on shop towels after laundering could pose a long-term health risk to workers who handle the towels daily.

In the Harris Interactive survey, if metals retained on laundered shop towels could result in workplace exposures exceeding toxicity exposure guidelines, workers would take the following actions:

- 93 percent would take greater safety precautions.
- 87 percent would ask for a safer alternative.
- 86 percent would raise the issue with a safety manager, employer or union.

Current Awareness of Shop Towel Risks Drives Inconsistent Behavior

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Changes

Even when workers indicate awareness of laundered shop towel risks, there is a gap between that knowledge and their behavior. This reflects confusion among workers, and the need for employers and safety managers to continue deepening their staff's understanding of laundered shop towel safety risks. For example, awareness that shop towels can retain heavy metals post-laundering does not lead to less skin contact or more hand-washing. In fact, 69 percent of workers do not clean their hands after every shop towel use.

Other unsafe practices indicating potential worker confusion include:

- **Bringing Shop Towels Home:** Forty-five percent of workers are aware that shop towels brought home from a facility could lead to other family members being exposed to heavy metals, but this group does not take shop towels home less frequently. Among all workers, over a third (36 percent) acknowledge bringing home at least one shop towel per week, and more than half (54 percent) say their typical coworker does so too.
- **Direct Skin Contact with Shop Towels:** Although nearly half (49 percent) say they are very or extremely careful after using a shop towel, only 17 percent of workers say they never wipe shop towels on exposed skin, while 26 percent of workers say they do so six or more times daily.
- **Shop Towels Used for Personal Hygiene and First Aid:** Eighteen percent of manufacturing workers report shop towel use for personal hygiene and first aid, with the most alarming examples including use as toilet paper or to stop bleeding/wipe up blood.

Workers do not indicate a clear understanding of how to address the problem, so they are looking to their organizations' leadership for effective solutions.

Primary Onus on Employers to Ensure Workplace Safety; Important Role for Unions

According to the survey, half of shop towel users cite working with them simply because they are what is provided on the facility's shop floor. As a result, 71 percent see the primary responsibility for keeping them informed on shop towel safety issues as the duty of their employers. Additionally, more than four in five workers feel unions should do more to keep them informed.

About the Survey

Harris Interactive, on behalf of Kimberly-Clark Professional, conducted the survey online within the United States between November 8-22, 2011, among 263 self-identified manufacturing workers. Respondents who participated in the survey were screened to meet the following criteria:

- Worked in manufacturing or transportation

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- Spent at least 50 percent of their day on the production floor of their work facility
- Used shop towels at least "sometimes"

Data was then weighted to reflect the population of U.S. manufacturing and transportation workers, according to 2010 CPS Census Bureau data, by gender, education, race, region and income. This survey represents the workers' own perceptions.

For more information on the survey and safety issues associated with laundered shop towels, please visit www.TheDirtOnShopTowels.com [4].

About Kimberly-Clark Professional

Kimberly-Clark Professional is dedicated to providing essential solutions for a healthier, safer and more productive workplace. These include a unique portfolio of innovative, cost-effective and sustainable offerings for office buildings and lodging properties, healthcare facilities, manufacturing environments, laboratories and cleanrooms, educational facilities, food preparation and processing operations, and home professionals. Kimberly-Clark Professional offers a comprehensive array of hand hygiene and contamination control solutions to break the germ transmission chain and help create a healthier workplace as well as wiping and safety solutions that minimize risk and drive productivity. Its trusted global brands include Kleenex, Scott, Jackson Safety, Wypall, KleenGuard and Kimtech. Located in Roswell, Ga., Kimberly-Clark Professional is one of Kimberly-Clark Corporation's four business sectors. For more information, visit www.kcprofessional.com [1].

About Kimberly-Clark

Kimberly-Clark and its well-known global brands are an indispensable part of life for people in more than 150 countries. Every day, 1.3 billion people -- nearly a quarter of the world's population -- trust K-C brands and the solutions they provide to enhance their health, hygiene and well-being. With brands such as Kleenex, Scott, Huggies, Pull-Ups, Kotex and Depend, Kimberly-Clark holds the No. 1 or No. 2 share positions in more than 80 countries.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.kcprofessional.com/>

[2] <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/>

[3] <http://www.thedirtonshoptowels.com/key-study-findings.aspx>

[4] <http://www.thedirtonshoptowels.com/>