Safe Handling of Hazardous Drugs: Are You Protected?

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Oncology nurses handle hazardous drugs when they administer medications to patients in inpatient and outpatient settings. Guidelines for the safe handling of hazardous drugs have been in place since the late 1980s; however, confusion still remains about the proper handling of the substances. Institutional policies vary and the use of personal protective equipment is inconsistent. In an effort to provide a safe working environment, nurses should be aware of the potential health risks of handling hazardous drugs and adhere to recommended guidelines to prevent occupational exposure.

At a Glance

- Chemotherapy residue is found on work surfaces where chemotherapy agents are handled and stored.
- Personal protective equipment use decreases the risk of exposure to hazardous drugs such as chemotherapy.
- All healthcare workers with the potential to be exposed to hazardous drugs should be monitored in a surveillance program.

Exposure to Hazardous Drugs

Medications are routinely handled by healthcare providers as a part of their daily patient care routine. Numerous medications are considered hazardous because of their mechanisms of action and can create an occupational risk to healthcare workers through exposure. Drugs are defined as hazardous if studies of animals or humans indicate that an exposure to the drugs creates a health risk (National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [NIOSH], 2004; OSHA, 1999) (see Figure 1). The electronic version of NIOSH Alert lists the drugs that meet the criteria to be labeled as hazardous (NIOSH). This list is revised routinely, and updates can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site at

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