Alaska Department of Labor and Workforce Development
LABOR STANDARDS AND SAFETY DIVISION

PHYSICAL AGENT DATA SHEET (PADS) - LASERS

Description

A laser is a device which produces a concentrated beam of electromagnetic energy. The beam of energy can be in the form of visible light or in the form of invisible infrared or ultraviolet radiation.

Lasers differ in many ways, but there are certain characteristics which all lasers have in common. For all lasers, the production of the concentrated beam of energy requires three basic processes. First, an energy source is applied to a solid, gaseous or liquid substance called the lasing material. The lasing material then produces radiation having a specific wavelength. Then by using mirrors, lenses and shutters, the light or infrared waves or ultraviolet rays are magnified and focused to produce the laser beam.

Lasers may be different from one another in several specific ways. The basic categories are:

1. Type of lasing material used.

   The lasing material may be solid, like ruby crystals or glass; may be a gas or mixture of gases, such as carbon dioxide or a helium-neon mixture; or liquid containing special dyes.
2. Source of energy applied.

   The energy applied to the lasing material may come from a powerful light source, electric current, or a chemical reaction.
3. Continuous or pulsed emission of the laser beam.

   The energy applied to the lasing material may be continuous or applied on pulses. Some lasers can produce hundreds of thousands of pulses per second.

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Hazards

The hazards related to the use of lasers vary depending on the type of laser, the power of the laser, the purpose and manner in which the laser is used, and the safety features of the laser.

Health Hazards

Eye injuries are the most serious danger from laser beams. The cornea of the eye is like a glass window that allows light to enter the eye. It is located in the very front part of the eyeball. The cornea is very sensitive and injuries to the cornea can be very painful. most injuries to the cornea heal without permanent damage. If the deep layers of the cornea are affected, permanent injuries can occur. The types of eye injuries which occur from improper use of lasers depend on the wavelengths of the laser beams. Laser injuries to the cornea are usually caused by lasers having short wavelengths in the ultraviolet and long wavelengths in the infrared ranges.

The lens of the eye is located toward the front of the eyeball but behind the cornea. Injuries to the lens can result in loss of transparency of the lens. The lens becomes cloudy and then blocks some of the light rays entering the eye, thus making it hard to create clear images on the retina. When the lens of the eye becomes cloudy, it is called a cataract. While damage to the cornea usually heals completely in a day or two, damage to the lens almost always persists. Very slight damage to the lens may go unnoticed, but repeated minimal damage can add up to serious damage later on. Damage to the lens may not cause problems until many years after the injuries to the lens occurred. Lens damage is most likely to occur with certain lasers that produce beams in the near-ultraviolet and near-infrared wavelength range.

The retina of the eye is the surface upon which visual images are produced. It is located in the back of the eyeball. Certain lasers in the wavelength ranges of visible light and near-infrared wavelength ranges can burn permanent blind spots in the retina causing partially or totally obscured vision.

Skin burns may also occur from the use of lasers but are less likely to occur and are less serious than eye injuries. When skin is exposed to a potentially dangerous laser beam, a person will usually feel the heat and remove the exposed part of the body from the path of the laser beam.

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Electrical Hazards

Some lasers require high voltage power supplies and some workers have received electrical shock because of carelessness while working around these power supplies. Almost all laser power supplies under certain circumstances, could possible cause electrical shock or electrocution. Following the general safety standards for other electrical or electronic equipment provides protection against the dangers of electrical shock or electrocution.

Chemical Hazards

Laser welding or cutting of metals will cause formation of many of the same metal oxides and other fumes that are produced in conventional welding processes. Explosions can occur when ice collects in valves or connectors in lasers which require very cold liquids, such as liquid nitrogen.

Lasers are commonly used in the workplace to perform the following functions:

Welding and machining
Surgery
Communication: via fiber optic technology
Shock hardening, glazing, drilling
Cutting textiles
Leveling and alignment of building sites

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Safety Classifications of Lasers

For safety purposes, lasers are divided into Classes I, II, III, and IV; Class I being least hazardous and Class IV most hazardous. Almost all reported eye injuries have been from Class IV lasers.

Almost all lasers that produce visible light beams are so bright that they can produce eye injuries. Therefore, to reduce risk of health hazards to the eye, many are designed in a way, such as enclosing the laser beam in a box, which prevents direct eye exposure to the beam.

Any laser which by itself is in Class II, III, or IV may be reclassified to a lower risk category if the laser beam is enclosed in such a way to decrease the risk of hazardous exposure to people.

Class I lasers are considered entirely safe even if used improperly. Class I lasers do not require any warning labeling. Some more hazardous lasers may be placed in the Class I category when they are part of a consumer or office machine which shields the user from the hazards of the laser beam. These machines, however, must have some type of warnings which are visible if the shields are removed.

Class II lasers are often referred to as "low-power" or "low-risk" lasers. These lasers are hazardous only when someone stares directly into the laser beam even though the beam hurts the eyes. Class II lasers require warnings to avoid staring directly into the beam.

Class III lasers are Moderate Risk or Medium Power lasers. They can produce eye injuries when the laser beams are viewed directly or when a sharp reflection is viewed directly. Class III is subdivided into Class IIIA and IIIB. Class IIIA is considered to be hazardous only when the laser beam is collected and focused by optical instruments, for example when surveyors look into a laser beam with a telescope-like instrument. Class IIIA lasers require warnings to prevent such hazardous practices. These lasers can

cause serious eye injuries before someone who accidentally looks directly into the beam has a chance to blink.

Class IV lasers produce beams that when reflected, even if it is not a sharp reflection, may cause serious eye and skin injuries, and where the beam may be a fire hazard. It is critical that the dangers of Class IV lasers are clearly marked with warning signs.

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Safety Precautions

Class I Controls

No user safety rules are necessary.

Class II Controls

1. Never permit a person to continuously stare into the laser source if exposure levels exceed the applicable permissible exposure level for the duration of intended staring.
2. Never point the laser at an individual's eye unless a useful purpose exists and the exposure level and duration will not exceed the permissible limit.

Class III Controls

1. Do not aim the laser at an individual's eye.
2. Permit only experienced personnel to operate the laser.
3. Enclose as much of the beam path as possible. Even a transparent enclosure will prevent individuals from placing their head or reflecting objects within the beam path. Terminations should be used at the end of the useful path of the direct and any secondary beams.
4. Shutters, polarizers and optical filters should be placed at the laser exit port to reduce the beam power to the minimal useful level.
5. Control spectators.
6. A warning light or buzzer should indicate laser operation. This is especially needed if the beam is not visible, e.g., for infrared lasers.
7. Do not permit laser tracking of nontarget vehicles or aircraft.
8. Operate the laser only in a restricted area, for example, in a closed room without windows, and place a warning sign on the door.
9. Place the laser beam path well above or well below the eye level of any sitting or standing observers whenever possible. The laser should be mounted firmly to assure that the beam travels only along its intended path.
10. Always use proper laser eye protection if a potential hazard exists for the direct beam or a specular reflection.

11. A key switch should be installed to minimize tampering by unauthorized individuals.
12. The beam or its specular reflection should never be directly viewed with optical instruments such as binoculars or telescopes without sufficient protective filters.
13. Remove all unnecessary mirror-like surfaces from within the vicinity of the laser beam path.

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Class IV Controls

Fortunately, these high-power lasers are seldom used outside of research laboratories and restricted industrial environments where personnel access is carefully controlled.

These lasers should only be operated within a localized enclosure, or in a controlled workplace, or where the beam is directed into outer space. If a complete local enclosure is not possible, laser operation indoors should be in a light-tight room with interlocked entrances to assure that the laser cannot emit while a door is open.

1. Eye protection is needed for all individuals working within the controlled area. If the laser beam irradiance is sufficient to be a serious skin or fire hazard, a suitable shielding should be used between the laser beam and any personnel.
2. Remote firing with video monitoring or other remote (safe) viewing techniques should be chosen when feasible.
3. Outdoor high-power laser devices such as satellite laser transmission systems and laser radar (LIDAR) should have positive stops on the azimuth and elevation transverse to assure that the beam cannot intercept occupied areas or nontarget aircraft.
4. Beam shutters, beam polarizers, and beam filters should always be used to limit use to authorized personnel only. The flashlamps in optical pump systems should be shielded to eliminate any direct viewing.
5. Backstops should be diffusely reflecting-fire resistant target materials where feasible. Safety enclosures should be used around microwelding and microdrilling work pieces to contain hazardous reflections from the work area. Microscopic viewing systems used to study the work piece should ensure against hazardous levels of reflection of laser irradiation back through the optics.

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Emergency Procedures

Anyone who is suspected of having a laser-related eye injury should be examined as soon as possible by an ophthalmologist, a physician who specializes in the care of eye injuries and diseases.

Laser-related skin burns should be treated as any other skin burns. Cold water should be applied immediately to the burn area for first and second degree burns (reddened skin or blistering skin). Third

degree burns (open wound) should be covered with a sterile dressing and the person taken to a medical facility. Never put ointments, creams or butter on burns.

Permissible Exposure Limits

Lasers used in construction shall comply with the Alaska Construction Code, Section 05.040(e):

Nonionizing radiation

1. Only qualified and trained employees shall be assigned to install, adjust, and operate laser equipment.
2. Proof of qualification of the laser equipment operator shall be available and in posession of operator at all times.
3. The employer shall provide antilaser eye protection as specified in section 50 of this subchapter for employees working in areas where a potential exposure to direct or reflected laser light greater than 5 milliwatts exist.
4. Areas in which lasers are used shall be posted with standard laser warning placards.
5. Beam shutters or caps shall be utilized, or the laser turned off, when laser transmission is not actually required. The laser shall be turned off whenever the laser is left unattended.
6. Only mechanical or electronic means shall be used as a detector for guiding the internal alignment of the lasers.
7. The laser beam shall not be directed at employees.
8. Under conditions of rain, snow, fog or dust the use of laser systems is prohibited.
9. Laser equipment shall bear a label to indicate maximum output.
10. Employees shall not be exposed to light intensities above:
    a. Direct staring: one microwatt per square centimeter.
    b. Incidental observing: two and one-half watts per square centimeter.
    c. Diffused reflected light: two and one-half watts per square centimeter.
11. Laser units in operation shall be set up above the heads of the employees.

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References

1. Sliney, D. & Walbarsht, M., Safety with Lasers and Other Optical Sources. Plenum Press, New York, NY 10013.

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