

Software tool helps hazmat crews

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Scientists at Georgia Tech in Atlanta have developed software for hand-held computers designed to quickly identify chemicals during an emergency.

Before emergency workers can begin to aid victims and decontaminate a scene, be it caused by a chemical spill or terrorist attack, they must determine what substances are present and understand the inherent risks to humans and the environment.

To help first responders and hazardous materials teams, researchers at the Georgia Tech Research Institute -- the non-profit applied research arm of the Georgia Institute of Technology -- developed what it calls Chemical Companion. The software tool operates on Windows CE-based personal digital assistants and provides detailed information on 130 of the most common chemicals associated with hazmat incidents.

"Knowing the characteristics of a chemical, such as its boiling point or density, tells us different things about how to approach the scene," said project co-director Christina Baxter, a senior research scientist.

"Suppose there's a fire. With some flammable substances water might make the fire burn even hotter and foam is needed to suppress the blaze."

The project, sponsored by the federal government's Technical Support Work Group, began beta-testing last fall in several cities, including New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

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