

HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCE ASSESSMENTS

Your Practical Guide



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Introduction

Your company's activities could be exposing your employees to hazards presented by a wide range of hazardous substances capable of damaging their health.

These substances can be:

- used directly in your company's activities
- produced during processes or by-products
- used in service functions such as cleaning, maintenance, repair work, research or development
- used as office sundries
- present because work is being carried out on the structure of a building.

Even when substances have been identified as hazardous, many can still be used without risks to health—provided those hazards are understood and appropriate precautions taken.

You should nonetheless follow the guiding principle that exposure to all substances hazardous to health, whatever their known or suspected hazards, should always be prevented where reasonably practicable.

(Ref. the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations)

The key to the management of hazardous substances is:

- Assessment of the risks to health
- Prevention of exposure where possible
- Substitution with a less hazardous substance
- Control of the exposure (assuming it is not possible to prevent it)
- Review controls if exposure indicates that these are failing
- Use and maintenance of control measures
- Keeping all control equipment clean
- Prohibiting eating, drinking and smoking in the immediate workplace
- Monitoring of exposure (may include health screening).
- Training of employees.

Identification

All hazardous substances must be identified – including those stored, handled, transported or used.

Don't overlook substances purchased as raw materials, cleaning agents, office sundries, laboratory chemicals, or for maintenance purposes as well as those that might be process-generated: final products, by-products, intermediates or wastes.

Register

You should use a register to collect information on all substances in the workplace, and use it to decide which are hazardous to health.

Anything you buy in should have a product label which is an important source of information, warning you of both chronic and acute exposure hazards.

Labels should identify the substance and highlight the principal hazards that may arise during transport, storage and use. They also set out basic safety precautions and emergency actions to counteract the main known hazards.

Data Sheets

Although good labels can be very helpful, the prime source of information is the manufacturers' or suppliers' hazard data sheet. This will include:

- the name of the substance as well as its composition and any hazardous components
- notes on the risks associated with all reasonably foreseeable uses of the substance
- details of the potential health hazards - i.e. the likely effects of both short term (acute) and long term (chronic) exposure by the relevant routes
- fire/explosion hazards
- handling, processing and use precautions, containing precise advice about the conditions necessary to ensure that the substance will be safe and without risks to health when in use
- the recommended type of personal protection necessary to supplement control measures, if applicable
- transport and storage precautions
- safe disposal arrangements and emergency action including fire, spillage, first-aid treatment and medical information.

Guidance

Further information on substances hazardous to health can be obtained from guidance material produced by:

- Government agencies and other authoritative bodies
- technical reference sources (textbooks, scientific/technical papers, trade journals etc.)
- professional institutions, trade associations, trade unions and other specialist consultancy services
- the HSE – EH40 which lists all known hazardous substances.

Assessment

You need to carry out risk assessments for all hazardous substances, to evaluate the risks to health and establish what control measures, if any, should be taken to eliminate or reduce those risks. Don't just consider normal, correct use in your assessments – you should also take into account any possible misuse or mishandling. How deep you go in your assessment will depend on how much potential there is for the substances in question to cause harm.

In all but the simplest cases, the assessment should be written. You should record enough information to indicate why decisions about risks and precautions have been reached.

Things you should take into account when evaluating risks:

- hazard
- quantity
- control measures
- exposure: who, how long and how much
- the nature of the work being carried out.

Records and Review

Records should reflect the detail with which the assessments have been carried out, and be presented in a form that will be relevant and useful. They should also indicate when assessments need to be reviewed – we recommend regular reviews of everything to check they are still valid.

Assessments will need interim review if:

- you think that the original assessment is no longer valid
- health monitoring identifies that workplace controls are failing
- there is a significant change in the circumstances of the work such as volume of production, plant, materials, process, control methods etc.
- work related ill-health is reported
- new evidence about hazards is identified
- new or improved control methods become feasible.

Competent Person

The assessment of hazardous substances must be carried out by someone who is competent (by experience, training and qualifications) to make a valid judgement in the circumstances.

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