

HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES

Your Practical Guide



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Introduction

The exposure of employees to harmful substances in the workplace is one of the more significant but less well-recognised hazards facing businesses. The use of particular chemicals – or even exposure to apparently innocuous every day materials such as hardwood dust – can lead to major health-related problems.

For example, sensitisation of the respiratory tract, lung function reduction, occupational asthma and nasal cancers are just some of the occupational diseases that arise from uncontrolled exposures in the working environment.

However, hazardous substances can still be used without significant risk to the health of your employees provided the hazards are understood, adequate controls are in place, and everyone receives sufficient information and training on the safeguards that they need to observe in order to protect themselves and others against harmful exposure.

The principal objective with hazardous substances, dusts, fumes, etc. is to keep everyone's exposure to them as low as is reasonably practicable at all times.

In order to achieve this, the control measures listed below must be adopted and observed.

They form a hierarchy of the actions that you should take. Those at the top of the list are the most general, while those towards the bottom are more specific and need to be introduced in the context of the broader measures:

- Assess the risks to your employees' health
- Substitute the substance posing the risk
- Segregate the workforce from the hazard
- Reduce or eliminate your employees' exposure to hazardous substances
- Monitor their exposure to hazardous substances
- Train your employees
- Make sure your employees use Personal Protective Equipment (but this is a last resort if the other measures cannot be adopted).

Identification

The first step in identifying substances in the workplace that may be hazardous is to prepare a register of the substances that are on the premises.

You need to include all substances – including those stored, handled, transported or used. Do not overlook:

- raw materials
- substances purchased as cleaning agents, office sundries, laboratory chemicals or for maintenance purposes
- substances that are process-generated: final products, by-products, intermediates or wastes.

Register

You should use the register to collect information on all substances in the workplace and assess which ones 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 known hazards.

Safety Data Sheets

Although good labels are an indication of the nature of a substance, the prime source of information is the manufacturer's or supplier's Safety Data Sheet, which gives the following definitive information:

- The chemical name and trade name of the substance, as well as its composition and any hazardous components
- Detailed notes on the risks associated with using the substance
- Details of the potential health hazards – i.e. the known effects of both short term (acute) and long term (chronic) exposure
- Fire/explosion hazards
- The precautions to be adopted when handling, processing or using the substance, including advice about the conditions necessary to ensure that the substance can be used safely and without risk to health
- The recommended type of Personal Protection necessary to supplement other control measures, if applicable
- Transport and storage precautions
- Safe disposal arrangements
- The emergency action to be taken in the event of, for example, fire, spillage, or the need for first aid treatment or other medical attention.

Guidance

Further information on substances that are hazardous to health can be obtained from various sources.

The recognised guidance material listing Occupational Health Exposure Levels is published annually by the HSE and is known as EH40, updated annually by the HSE. This is a definitive publication listing the full range of all known hazardous media and the maximum permitted exposure levels in the workplace.

Some other sources of useful information include:

- Government agencies, including The United Nations Hazardous Substances database
- technical reference sources (textbooks, scientific/technical papers, trade journals etc.)
- professional institutions, trade associations, trade unions and other specialist consultancy services.

Assessment

Once you have established that hazardous substances are present in your workplace, the next step is to assess the risks to health and decide what control measures, if any, must be taken to eliminate or reduce those risks. The depth of your assessment should depend on the potential for the substances to cause harm.

Do not assume that hazardous substances will always be handled and used correctly. You must also take any possible misuse or mishandling into account.

The points to consider when evaluating risks include:

- who exactly is exposed to the substance
- the degree of hazard presented by the substance
- the quantity of the substance in use
- any existing control measures, and how adequate they are
- details of the work your employees do which exposes them to the substance
- any arrangements for medical surveillance.

Information regarding safety and control measures must be made available in an easily understood format for those employees actually involved in using the substance, and it should form part of any induction or procedural training.

Records

All assessments must be recorded, giving enough information to indicate why particular decisions about risks and precautions were reached.

The records need to:

- reflect the detail with which the assessments have been carried out
- be presented in a format that is relevant and easily traceable
- indicate clearly when assessments need to be reviewed.

Records of all assessments — together with supporting documentation regarding use, exposure and medical surveillance – must be kept for a period of 40 years after the date of the last entry.

Reviews

The frequency of reviews will vary from organisation to organisation, but as a general rule we recommend annual reviews of all assessments to check they are still valid.

Assessments will need to be reviewed after less than a year if:

- you have reason to think that the original assessment is no longer valid
- there is a significant change in how the work is done – such as volume of production, plant, materials, process, control methods, etc.
- there is a proven link between the substance and work-related ill health or absences
- new evidence about health hazards is identified or statutory exposure levels change
- new or improved engineering controls or technological advances become available
- an alternative, less hazardous substance becomes available.

Competent Person

All assessments about the use of hazardous substances – and your employees' exposure to them – must always be carried out by someone who is fully competent (by experience, training and qualifications) to make an informed and qualified decision.

Personal Protective Equipment

The use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) must only be considered in circumstances where it is not practicable to implement or use other means of controlling or reducing the exposure. It is a decision that you will need to justify with care and to document in the records.

The COSHH regulations state that PPE must be regarded as a final option once the use of all other control measures have been considered and eliminated.

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

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