

COSHH ESSENTIALS

What you need to know

INTRODUCTION

Let me start by asking you this. ... Do you work with harmful substances?

If you answered no, it's likely you've fallen for a common hazardous substance myth.

It might not be obvious, but the reality is most workplaces use substances that can be hazardous to health.

Chemicals and other hazardous substances can put your health at risk, so understandably, the law requires employers to control exposure to such substances under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations – often shortened to COSHH.

This introduction to COSHH handout explains what hazardous substances are and where they can be found in the workplace. You'll find out what kinds of health risks are associated with them and we'll also cover the benefits of following COSHH guidelines.

KEY INSIGHTS

What is a substance hazardous to health? - Hazardous substances can be found in nearly all work environments and take lots of different forms. They could be solids, liquids, gases, mists or even fumes.

Effects of hazardous substances - The health effects of hazardous substances can be very serious, and cause both short and long term effects.

Legislation, Rules and Regulations - As an employee, you are protected under law.

COSHH Principles - To comply with the regulations, your employer needs to follow the 8 COSHH Principles.

WHAT IS A SUBSTANCE HAZARDOUS TO HEALTH?

What do we mean by a 'hazardous substance'? Hazardous substances can be found in nearly all work environments and take lots of different forms. They could be solids, liquids, gases, mists or even fumes.

Some are obvious, like adhesives, paints and cleaning agents. Others are not so obvious, like natural substances such as grain and dust.

Under COSHH there are a range of substances regarded as hazardous to health.

A hazardous substance could be a:

- Chemical
- Fumes
- Vapours
- Gases (including asphyxiating gases)
- Products containing chemicals
- Dusts
- Mists
- Biological agents such as bacteria and viruses

The European Regulation on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures (CLP) – came into force in all EU member states, including the UK, in January 2010.

The CLP Regulation adopts the EU Globally Harmonised System (GHS) on the classification and labelling of chemicals.

It replaced the Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 2009 (also known as CHIP) in June 2015.

The intention of the CLP Regulation is very similar to CHIP – substances and mixtures that are placed on the market should be classified, labelled and packaged appropriately.

But because CLP adopts the GHS, in time, the same classifications and labelling will be used throughout the world.

Hazard pictograms alert us to the presence of a hazardous chemical. The pictograms help us to know that the chemicals we are using might cause harm to people or the environment.



Explosive



Flammable



Oxidizing



Compressed Gas



Corrosive



Toxic



Harmful



Health and Hazard



Environmental Hazard

COSHH applies to virtually all substances hazardous to health, but it does not cover lead, asbestos and radioactive substances, not because they aren't hazardous, but because they have their own specific regulations.

EFFECTS OF HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES

The health effects of hazardous substances can be very serious, and cause both short (acute) and long (chronic) term effects.

For example: if a cleaner was to spill a bleach product onto their skin, it would likely cause a burn or inflammation – ordinarily a short term effect. But should the bleach splash into the cleaner's eye, the damage to vision could be permanent.

The reality is, anyone who works with or is exposed to hazardous substances is at risk.

It should always be the aim of any employer to prevent exposure to hazardous substances – after all the greatest way to control risk is to remove the hazard. Where that's not possible there must be adequate controls put in place.

Hazardous substances can take a variety of forms, which obviously affect how the particular substance can enter or have an effect on a person's body.

The main routes of entry to the body are:

- Ingestion
- Injection
- Absorption
- Inhalation

Hazardous substances are found in nearly all work environments, from farms to factories, and they include:

- Substances used directly in work activities
- Substances generated during work activities
- Naturally occurring substances
- And biological agents such as bacteria and other micro-organisms

Many people are exposed to a variety of substances at work, which can, under some circumstances, have a harmful effect on their health. These are called hazardous substances.

If exposure to a hazardous substance is not properly controlled it may cause ill health in a number of ways. The substance may cause harm by:

- Too much being taken into the body through breathing
- Being absorbed through the skin
- Being swallowed
- Acting directly on the body at the point of contact

Some illnesses caused by exposure to hazardous substances in the workplace may not appear until a long time after the first exposure.

Therefore, it's important to know in advance how to protect the health of people working with hazardous substances and also of other people who may be affected by the work being carried out.

Workplace exposure limits are British occupational exposure limits and are set in order to help protect the health of workers. WELs are concentrations of hazardous substances in the air, averaged over a specified period of time, referred to as a time-weighted average.

Two time periods are used: Long term and short term.

LEGISLATION, RULES AND REGULATIONS

Ok – so you now know that hazardous substances can be very dangerous, it will no doubt be reassuring to find out that, as an employee, you are protected under law.

Aside from The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 and more recently the amendment in 2004, apply to activities involving hazardous substances and help employers meet their duties under COSHH legislation.

COSHH PRINCIPLES

So what does COSHH require you and your employer to actually do?

To comply with the regulations, your employer needs to follow the 8 COSHH Principles.

Step 1 – Assess the risks

Step 2 – Decide what precautions are needed

Step 3 – Prevent or adequately control exposure

Step 4 – Ensure that control measures are used and maintained

Step 5 – Monitor exposure

Step 6 – Carry out appropriate health surveillance

Step 7 – Prepare plans and procedures to deal with accidents, incidents and emergencies

And

Step 8 – Ensure that employees are properly informed, trained and supervised

FINAL SUMMARY

Every year, thousands of workers are made ill by hazardous substances –don't become one of them. The COSHH regulations are designed to protect you.

If you want more information on the topic of COSHH you should speak to your manager, supervisor or safety representative.

Remember – nothing you do is worth getting hurt for.