

## **H&S Information Sheet #5**

## **Hazardous Substances**

### **Introduction**

The law requires that employers control exposure of both workers and others to chemicals or other hazardous substances that can put people's health at risk. The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1999 (COSHH) lay down employers' legal duties.

### **What Are Hazardous Substances?**

Hazardous substances include:

- substances used directly in work activities (e.g. cleaning agents, adhesives)
- substances generated during work activities (e.g. fumes)
- naturally occurring substances (e.g. bacteria and dust)

Hazardous substances can cause a range of effects including:

- skin irritation or dermatitis
- allergic reaction leading to asthma
- loss of consciousness from toxic fumes
- infection from bacteria
- cancer, which may appear long after exposure to the substance that caused it.

### **Warning Labels**

For the vast majority of commercial chemicals, the presence (or not) of one of the following warning labels will indicate whether COSHH is applicable. Warning labels are orange boxes containing one of a number of black symbols.

There is no warning label on ordinary household washing-up liquid, so it can be used at work without requiring a COSHH assessment. However, there is a warning label on most bottles of bleach, so COSHH does apply to its use in the workplace.



#### **CORROSIVE**

Will cause burns to skin, eyes and respiratory tract and can cause permanent damage.



#### **IRRITANT**

Will cause redness and irritation to skin, eyes and respiratory tract, but no permanent damage.



#### **HARMFUL**

May cause temporary or permanent damage to your health if swallowed or inhaled.



#### **TOXIC**

Will cause acute or chronic damage to health when inhaled or swallowed.



#### **HAZARDOUS TO ENVIRONMENT**

May damage plantlife +/- animals +/- waterways, etc.

COSHH lays down several basic steps that employers and employees should take.

### Risk Assessment

The first step is to decide whether any substances being used are hazardous, by checking for warning labels.

***Identify***  
**the hazardous substances**

***Assess the risks***  
**these substances present to**  
**people's health**

Employers have a legal responsibility to ensure a COSHH assessment is completed. Managers and employees have the most knowledge of what really happens in the workplace, and their knowledge should be used when carrying this out. Employees should also be informed of the results of the assessment.

### Control Measures

The second step is to take action to remove or reduce any significant risks identified. Risks should be **eliminated** as far as it is reasonably practicable to do so, for instance by not using any product that carries a warning label.

*British Heart Foundation shops do not use any product that has an orange warning label.*

If a shop does not have bleach on the premises, then there is no possibility of it being mixed with another chemical to create chlorine gas. Bleach can be misused in other ways, too. It can be mistakenly drunk, causing serious ill health and even death.

Since there are alternatives to bleach on the market, local authority inspectors would expect to see these being used in charity shops.

*PDSA does not permit the use of bleach for this reason and uses other proprietary cleaning products that do the same job.*

If products containing hazardous substances are used they should always be kept in their

original, labelled containers and be stored out of reach of the public, especially children.

Other control measures would be to provide shops with an approved list of products that they are allowed to use, to restrict the use to authorised persons only and to provide protective gloves.

Maintenance of control measures should be monitored through regular safety inspections. (See Information Sheet No. 7 for more details.)

### Assessment Records

Managers need to keep a record of the main findings of the assessment. Enough information is needed to explain the decisions taken about whether risks are significant and the need for any control measures.

It is also necessary to record the actions workers and others need to take to ensure hazardous substances are adequately controlled. Although records are mainly for the benefit of managers to form part of a system to protect health, others may want to see them (e.g. safety representatives, H&S inspectors).

The assessment should state when the next review is planned, but it should be a "living" document, which should be amended if circumstances change. It should be reviewed:

- at not less than 5-yearly intervals or
- whenever there is reason to think it is no longer valid (e.g. where there has been a significant change in the work)

For some substances (e.g. sticky stuff remover for cleaning books), a generic assessment would suffice. The main risk assessment could be held centrally, with shops being informed on the outcome of the assessment.

### Information and Training

For control measures to be fully effective, employees need to be provided with suitable information, instructions and training about:

- the nature of the substances they work with, or are exposed to, and the risks created by exposure to these substances
- the precautions they should take

The manufacturers of products containing hazardous substances will supply on request safety data sheets that give users essential information on the risks to health and on the appropriate precautionary and emergency measures.

### Flammables

The Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres Regulations (DSEAR) 2002 are aimed at protecting workplaces against risks from fire and explosions arising from substances used, or present, in the workplace.

Most charity shops would be affected by these regulations as they often use aerosol sprays (e.g. polishes, air fresheners) that are flammable. These do not have an orange warning label, merely the word "Flammable".

Shops selling furniture are likely to have additional products, such as paints, varnishes and solvents that may be "Highly Flammable", carrying the following warning label.



#### **HIGHLY FLAMMABLE**

Produces vapours which will burn at temperatures below 21°C, if they come into contact with a spark, flame, etc.

A generic risk assessment, kept on record centrally, should be sufficient for most charity retailers, with the shops informed of its outcome. The most obvious control measures would involve limiting the quantity of flammables in shops, storing them away from sources of ignition (and from children), and not smoking when using them.

### Further Reading

*COSHH website:*

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/>

*COSHH a brief guide to the regulations.*  
HSE leaflet INDG 136REV3

*COSHH essentials: easy steps to control chemicals.*

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