Frequently Asked Questions
The Use of Chemicals or Other Hazardous Substances

1. What is a hazardous Substance?

The term hazardous substance covers a very wide range of substances with the potential to cause harm if they are inhaled, ingested, come into contact with or are absorbed by the skin. Substances hazardous to health can occur in many forms, e.g. solids, liquids, vapours, gases, dusts, fibres, fumes, mists and smoke.

2. I've heard the term COSHH mentioned, what does this mean?

The term "COSHH" refers to the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (Amendment) Regulations, 2004, the primary piece of legislation controlling the use of these substances.

The COSHH regulations require a number of things to be done before a hazardous substance can be used. Briefly:

Risk assessment

The purpose of the risk assessment is to enable the manager to make a decision about the measures necessary to prevent or adequately control the exposure of their employees to risk.

A COSHH risk assessment is a special risk assessment that specifically looks at risk associated with use of a hazardous substance. The COSHH risk assessment will determine what needs to be done to prevent or control exposure.

Control of risk

The first priority is to consider how to prevent exposure to the hazardous substance, this could be achieved by:

- Substituting the substance for a non-hazardous substance
- Modifying a process to eliminate the production of a hazardous by product or waste product
- Changing the method of work so that the operation giving rise to the exposure is no longer necessary.

If it is not possible to eliminate or prevent exposure then you should consider whether you can significantly reduce exposure by:

- Using an alternative substance
- Using a different form of the same substance (e.g. pellets instead of powder)
- Using a different process.

The control measures that may be used could be a combination of the following:

- Totally enclose the process
- Use plant or process that keeps the production or generation of the hazardous substance to a minimum
- Install suitable ventilation (e.g. fume cabinet)
- Reduce the time spent working with the substance
- Ensure suitable cleaning methods are used
- Provide safe storage and disposal procedures
- Ensure adequate facilities for washing
- Use of personal protective equipment.

The physical "engineering" controls should be used in preference to the controls that rely on people. e.g. consider the use of ventilation to control exposure rather than just offering an employee a respirator.

Using, maintaining, examining and testing control measures

Arrangements will need to be put in place to ensure control measures are used and that they are subjected to any maintenance, testing or examination to ensure they work as planned. Some of these tests may be required by law, e.g. testing of fume cabinets and other ventilation systems.

Monitoring Exposure

In some situations it is necessary to monitor the levels of a substance that employees are exposed to. This is usually because the Government sets limits on certain substances to protect employees. The Authority will then need to monitor to ensure these limits aren't breached.

Health Surveillance

When working with certain substances there are requirements to undertake health surveillance on the employees using them. This is used as a check to ensure that the controls in place to prevent or control exposure are working. For example those employees who work with lead may require regular blood tests to ensure that levels of lead in their blood are not reaching levels considered too high.

Information, instruction and training

If people are working with hazardous substances then they need to be provided with information, instruction and where necessary training on the risks they are exposed to as well as the controls in place and how to use them. This is crucial in managing risk associated with hazardous substances. There is no point having COSHH assessments and controls in place if no – one knows how to use them.

Emergency situations

Often, COSHH assessments are undertaken on the use of a substance in everyday, ordinary circumstances. It is essential that consideration be given to what happens when things go wrong. For example, do employees know what to do if they spill a container of hazardous substance? The controls in place for managing risk in the normal process may be totally unsuitable for controlling risk in these unplanned events.

Review

Like all risk assessments a COSHH assessment must be reviewed regularly or when there is evidence to suggest that it may no longer be valid (e.g. a process changes or a different substance is used).

3. What do I need to do before I use a hazardous substance?

Speak to your manager if you are unsure of the risks or controls associated with using a hazardous substance. Your manager should be able to provide you with a copy of the COSHH risk assessment and give details on the controls in place to prevent or control exposure to that substance.

Always follow the instructions given to you. It is a criminal offence to ignore or misuse equipment provided for your safety and you could be personally prosecuted if you are found to not be acting in accordance with instructions.

If you are in any doubt ask you manager. If you don't get a satisfactory reply then follow the route for escalation concerns found on the Corporate H&S Intranet site.

4. I'm a manager, my employees use hazardous substances but I don't know where the COSHH risk assessment is or what I have to do.

Contact your Directorate Health and Safety Officer for further information. The Authority uses a system called SYPOL to assist with COSHH risk assessments. The software will, using information supplied by you prepare the COSHH risk assessment. However local arrangements will need to be put in place to manage other aspects of COSHH including: training, any occupational monitoring that may be required, the provision and training of personal protective equipment and the maintenance of any control measures in place. Your duties as a manager do not end once you have been supplied with the COSHH assessment.

5. I've received a material safety data sheet (MSDS) for a chemical, is that the same thing as COSHH risk assessment?

NO! A material safety data sheet (MSDS, aka safety data sheet, hazard sheets, COSHH sheet etc.) is information provided by a supplier on the properties of a hazardous substance. All hazardous substances supplied must have one, provided by the supplier of that substance and they must be in a standard format. (NB: Some processes that generate hazardous substances might not have an MSDS) An MSDS gives information on, amongst other things:

- The physical and chemical properties of the substance
- Details of the chemicals in the substance
- First aid information
- Emergency information
- Details of any packaging or transportation restrictions.

An MSDS essentially gives details on the hazardous properties of the substance, the COSHH risk assessment will consider the risk associated with using the substance in a certain way.

In most cases the MSDS will only provide a small amount of the information necessary for the COSHH risk assessment.

6. Where can I get further information?

You can get further information from your Directorate Health and Safety Officer, telephone the HSE Infoline in 08701 545500 or you can access the following web site. You must have external internet access to view this site:

- http://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/index.htm

The following publication may also provide you with useful information:

- Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002, Approved Code of Practice (L5)
- Seven steps to successful substitution of hazardous substances.

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