



UNIT-2

Working with Substances Hazardous to Health

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- Work confidently in the presence of a wide variety of hazardous substances
- Identify potentially hazardous substances and their associated risks
- Understand what a variety of important safety and warning symbols mean

Unit 2

Working with Substances Hazardous to Health

Which Substances are Harmful?

- Dusty or fume-laden air can cause lung diseases, eg in welders, quarry workers or woodworkers.
- Metalworking fluids can grow bacteria and fungi which cause dermatitis and asthma.
- Flowers, bulbs, fruit and vegetables can cause dermatitis.
- Wet working, eg catering and cleaning, can cause dermatitis.
- Prolonged contact with wet cement in construction can lead to chemical burns and/or dermatitis.
- Benzene in crude oil can cause leukemia.

Many other products or substances used at work can be harmful, such as paint, ink, glue, lubricant, detergent and beauty products.

Many substances can harm health but, used properly, they almost never do.

Substances can also have other dangerous properties. They may be flammable, for example solvent-based products may give off flammable vapour. Clouds of dust from everyday materials, such as wood dust or flour, can explode if ignited.

Myth 'It's natural so it can't be harmful.'

Reality Natural materials can be harmful. For example, henna can cause dermatitis and asthma, wood dust can cause asthma, stone or concrete dust can cause lung disease such as silicosis, and citrus oils can cause skin problems.

Look at each Substance

Which substances are involved? In what way are they harmful? You can find out by:

- Checking information that came with the product, eg a safety data sheet;
- Asking the supplier, sales representative and your trade association;
- Looking in the trade press for health and safety information;
- Checking on the Internet, eg HSE's website pages for your trade.

Think about the Task

If the substance is harmful, how might workers be exposed? By:

- Breathing in gases, fumes, mist or dust?
- Contact with the skin?
- Swallowing?
- Contact with the eyes?
- Skin puncture?

Bear these in mind when you look at the tasks.

Myth 'I don't work with harmful substances.

Reality Most businesses use substances that can be hazardous to health – even something as simple as flour can act as a substance hazardous to health.

Exposure by Breathing in

Once breathed in, some substances can attack the nose, throat or lungs while others get into the body through the lungs and harm other parts of the body, eg the liver.

Exposure by Skin Contact

Some substances damage skin, while others pass through it and damage other parts of the body. Skin gets contaminated:

- By direct contact with the substance, eg if you touch it or dip your hands in it; .
- By splashing;
- By substances landing on the skin, eg airborne dust;
- By contact with contaminated surfaces – this includes contact with contamination inside protective gloves.

Exposure by Swallowing

People transfer chemicals from their hands to their mouths by eating, smoking etc without washing first.

Exposure to the Eyes

Some vapours, gases and dusts are irritating to eyes. Caustic fluid splashes can damage eyesight permanently.

Exposure by Skin Puncture

Risks from skin puncture such as butchery or needlestick injuries are rare, but can involve infections or very harmful substances, eg drugs.

Safety Data Sheets

Products you use may be 'dangerous for supply'. If so, they will have a label that has one or more hazard symbols. Some examples are given here.

These products include common substances in everyday use such as paint, bleach, solvent or fillers. When a product is 'dangerous for supply', by law, the supplier must provide you with a safety data sheet.

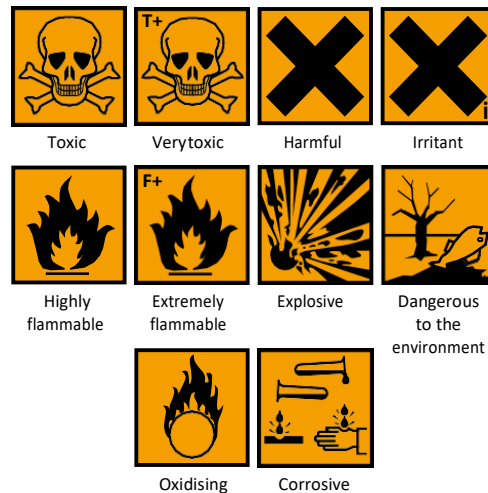
Note: medicines, pesticides and cosmetic products have different legislation and don't have a safety data sheet. Ask the supplier how the product can be used safely.

Safety data sheets can be hard to understand, with little information on measures for control. However, to find out about health risks and emergency situations, concentrate on:

- Sections 2 and 16 of the sheet, which tell you what the dangers are;
- Sections 4-8, which tell you about emergencies, storage and handling.

Since 2009, new international symbols have been gradually replacing the European symbols. Some of them are similar to the European symbols, but there is no single word describing the hazard. Read the hazard statement on the packaging and the safety data sheet from the supplier.

European symbols



New International symbols



Hazard Checklist

- Does any product you use have a danger label?
- Does your process produce gas, fume, dust, mist or vapour?
- Is the substance harmful to breathe in?
- Can the substance harm your skin?
- Is it likely that harm could arise because of the way you use or produce it?
- What are you going to do about it?
 - Use something else?
 - Use it in another, safer way?
 - Control it to stop harm being caused?

Assessing Risk

Risk assessment is not just a paper exercise. It's about taking sensible steps to prevent ill health. You need to know how workers are exposed, and to how much, before you can decide if you need to do anything to reduce their exposure. The COSHH Regulations require employers to assess the risk to their employees, and to prevent or adequately control those risks. Sometimes, it's easy to judge the amount of exposure to substances and decide what you can do about it.

When the task involves very small amounts of material, even if these are harmful, when there is little chance of it escaping, the risk is low. But the risk in a different task – such as cleaning up and disposal will be higher because the harmful substance may be breathed in or get onto the skin. When the task involves larger amounts of material, with obvious leaks, exposure is higher and so is the risk.

Whether the substance is harmful or not, your need to control it is obvious. Decide what measures you need to take, and when.

If you have five or more employees, you must record your assessment but, even if you have fewer than five, it makes sense to write down what steps you have taken to identify the risks. And the really important part is making a list of the actions you are taking to control the risks to health. You can look at examples of risk assessments for different industries on www.hse.gov.uk/risk/casestudies. HSE has developed a free internet tool for identifying good control practice: www.coshh-essentials.org.uk. It covers a wide range of processes and activities and also produces advice for products that have safety data sheets.

However, there may be no 'good practice' advice available for your process. Where this is small-scale with obvious control measures, you can do the assessment yourself.

What are Exposure Control Measures?

Control measures are always a mixture of equipment and ways of working to reduce exposure. The right combination is crucial. No measures, however practical, can work unless they are used properly. So any 'standard operating procedure' should combine the right equipment with the right way of working. This means instructing, training and supervising the workers doing the tasks. You need control measures that work and continue to work – all day, every day.

Examples of Control Measures

Substance, process	Control equipment	Way of working	Managing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cleaning with solvent on rag. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use a rag holder. ■ Provide a small bin with a lid for used rags. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Avoid skin contact. ■ Reduce solvent vapour from used rags. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Check controls are used. ■ Safe disposal.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Dust and sparks from abrasive wheel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Put an enclosure around the wheel and extract the air to a safe place. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Check the airflow indicator. ■ Make sure the extraction works. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Maintain controls. ■ Test controls as required by law.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Fume from cutting demolition scrap. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ventilated welding helmet, gloves. ■ Washing facilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Work outdoors upwind of the fume wherever possible. ■ Allow the fume to clear before removing helmet. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Check if there is any lead paint on the scrap being cut. ■ Carry out health checks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cutting-fluid mist from a lathe. ■ Swarf. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Put an enclosure around the lathe and extract the air to a safe place. ■ Protective gloves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use skin-care products. ■ Make sure the extraction works. ■ Allow time for the mist to clear from the enclosure before opening it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Train workers. ■ Check and maintain fluid quality. ■ Test controls as required by law. ■ Carry out health checks.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Dust from disc cutter on stone worktop. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Use an enclosure to extract air to a safe place. ■ High-efficiency vacuum cleaner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Cut and polish worktops inside an enclosure. ■ Vacuum up dust. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Test and maintain controls. ■ Carry out health checks.

Choosing Control Measures

In order of priority:

1. Eliminate the use of a harmful product or substance and use a safer one.
2. Use a safer form of the product, eg paste rather than powder.
3. Change the process to emit less of the substance.
4. Enclose the process so that the product does not escape.
5. Extract emissions of the substance near the source.
6. Have as few workers in harm's way as possible.
7. Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves, coveralls and a respirator. PPE must fit the wearer.

If your control measures include 5, 6 and 7, make sure they all work together.

Myth 'They wouldn't sell it to us if it wasn't safe.'

Reality Just because something is available to buy, does not mean it is safe – you can buy cyanide for industrial use.

Control equipment comes in many forms. It includes ventilation to extract dust, mist and fume; glove boxes and fume cupboards; spray booths and refuges (clean rooms in dirty work areas). It also includes using water to reduce dust, and systems for disinfecting cooling water.

For control equipment, your supplier should provide a 'user manual'. If you don't have one, ask for it. And if this is impossible, you may need professional help to write one. The user manual should set out schedules for checks, maintenance and parts replacement. For example it should include:

- A description of the system;
- The daily checks the worker or supervisor needs to carry out, eg the ventilation is turned on, the airflow indicator gives the right reading;
- The weekly or monthly checks the supervisor or owner needs to carry out, eg of equipment wear and tear, and that short cuts are not creating dangers;
- Details of any thorough examination and test;
- Signs of wear and control failure;
- A list of replaceable parts;
- A description of how operators should use the system so it works effectively.

Remedy defects in good time. It is pointless making checks if you take no action when something is wrong. And you are not managing health and safety properly if the 'thorough examination and test' produces a long list of 'actions needed'.

Keep simple records of your checks and actions, eg in a logbook, and keep these records for at least five years.

Myth 'I've given them all masks – problem solved!'

Reality This won't solve it. Control the source of exposure and then they might not need masks.

Staying in Control: Checking and Maintaining

Once you've got control, you need to keep it. As the employer, you must make sure that the control measures (equipment and the way of working) keep working properly.

You should name someone to be in charge of checking and maintaining control measures. It could be you, or someone you appoint, as long as they know what they need to do, and are able to do it. That is, they are 'competent' to:

- Check that the process isn't emitting uncontrolled contaminants;
- Check that the control equipment continues to work as it was designed;
- Check that workers follow the right way of working.

Two of the most common control measures where maintenance is critical are local exhaust ventilation (LEV) and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Local Exhaust Ventilation (LEV)

If you use local exhaust ventilation to control exposure, it needs regular checking and thorough Examination and testing at least once every 14 months.

Many people, eg engineers or insurance companies can carry out thorough examination and testing of LEV.

Whoever does the work must be competent.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Personal protective equipment is often used as part of control measures. This also needs checking And maintenance because, if it fails, it no longer provides protection and exposes the wearer to danger. The users need to know exactly what they are doing, and so do the supervisors.

PPE suppliers and trade associations can tell you about training in how to use it properly.

Checklist for Good Control Practice

- Do you design and run your processes to keep the spread of contaminants as low as possible?
- Do you think about all routes of exposure – breathing in, on skin or swallowing?
- Do you choose control measures according to the amount of substance, how it gets into the body and how much harm it will cause?
- Do you make sure that measures are effective, easy to use, and work properly?
- Do you also need to issue personal protective equipment (PPE)?
- Do you check regularly that measures continue to work, and keep simple records?
- Do you tell workers about the dangers and how to use control measures properly?
- Do you avoid increasing the overall health and safety risks when making changes?

Skills and Experience

Competence

Ensure that whoever designs, installs, maintains and tests your control measures is competent – they have the necessary skills, knowledge and experience. You can assess the competence of equipment and service providers with questions such as:

- Have you done this sort of work before?
- What are your qualifications?
- Do you belong to a professional organisation?
- Can I speak to previous clients?

Ideally, you want someone who knows your industry, has a successful track record, and gives good value for money.

Worker Involvement

Involve your workers in developing control measures to make sure they are suitable for the way they carry out the work. Encourage them to suggest improvements, and to report anything they think might be going wrong.

Training, Instruction and Information

Explain to your workers, and anyone else who needs to know, what the dangers are. It is poor practice just to hand them a page of written information.

- Show workers how to use control measures properly, and how to check that they are working.
- Carry out practice drills for cleaning up spills safely – do this before any spillages happen.
- If workers need to use respirators, they also need face fitting and training.
- If they need to use protective gloves, they need to know how to put them on and take them off without contaminating their skin.

Keeping Workers Healthy

Monitoring Exposure

Monitoring normally means air sampling but it may also involve taking biological samples, eg breath or urine. Monitoring normally makes reference to 'Workplace Exposure Limits' (WELs) published by HSE.

Health Checks

If your trade press, HSE, or other information, shows there is a problem with health in your trade, such as asthma or dermatitis, your employees may need special health checks. The most common checks are for respiratory disease such as asthma and skin disease.

REACH

REACH is a European Union regulation concerning the **R**egistration, **E**valuation, **A**uthorisation and restriction of **C**hemicals. It came into force on 1 June 2007 and replaces a number of European Directives and Regulations with a single system.

REACH will operate alongside COSHH and is designed so that better information on the hazards of chemicals and how to use them safely will be passed down the supply chain by chemical manufacturers and importers through improved safety data sheets.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *COSHH: Risk Assessment Log Book Paperback – September 14, 2020*
by Melangem MM
- ✓ *Health and safety Paperback – Large Print, June 13, 2016*
by Mr Steven Mark Pasha