

Hazardous Substances Handling

As an employer, you have a legal obligation to protect the health and well-being of your employees. Every year, hazardous substances may cause adverse health effects among workers, and you need to ensure you protect staff from these risks.

Poor health can significantly increase absenteeism and decrease the profits of your business. Not to mention the impact accidents have on morale, productivity and even retention

That's why health and safety is so important in the workplace. There are an enormous number of substances that can be hazardous to your employees and to some people. This includes chemicals, dust and fumes or other substances harmful to health that you may not be aware of.

If you need immediate advice on how to handle COSHH or want to gain a better understanding of health regulations, get in touch with one of our health and safety experts on 0844 561 8133

What is COSHH?

COSHH stands for 'Control of Substances Hazardous to Health' and is required by law. COSHH regulations require an employer to control these substances. A COSHH risk assessment concentrates on hazardous substances and highlights areas where control measures are needed to keep employees and other people safe.

Under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH, 2002), the law requires employers to either prevent, reduce, or at the very least, control exposure to hazardous substances to prevent ill health for their workers.

It is therefore an extremely broad yet detailed piece of legislation and will be different for every business. There are several substances that can be harmful to employees, and the list is too exhaustive for even the Health and Safety Executive to fully define.

Why is COSHH important?

Workers could suffer from lung disease, cancer, and skin disease because of chemical substances. These diseases cost millions of pounds each year to society, industry, and of course, the individuals affected.

The COSHH Regulations aim to keep your team out of harm's way and reduce the number of work-related injuries and health conditions across the UK.

Breaching these regulations puts your workers at risk of harm and ill health, and non-compliance is also a crime that could result in prosecution.

By following the COSHH Regulations, a company can save money and be more effective by not having to replace trained workers – improving productivity and cutting waste.

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Ensuring that workers stay healthy can also lead to healthy profits. Good health is good business.

What hazardous substances are covered by COSHH?

The substances covered by COSHH can be divided into broader categories, such as:

1. Chemicals.
2. Products containing chemicals.
3. Fumes.
4. Dust.
5. Vapours.
6. Mists.
7. Nanotechnology.
8. Gasses and asphyxiating gasses
9. Biological agents (germs – If the packaging has any of the hazard symbols, then it is classed as a hazardous substance.)

Are there any substances not covered by COSHH?

Yes,

1. Lead.
2. Asbestos.
3. Radioactive substances.

These hazardous substances have their own set of specific regulations and control measures that employers must follow.

What are COSHH symbols?

There are many COSHH signs and symbols you need to be aware of. Some of them are common, whereas you'll only find others in certain work environments.

You can identify these symbols by the red diamond frame and black picture at the centre.

Recognising COSHH signs and understanding their meanings is crucial to keeping your staff safe. And ensuring they're aware of the relevant dangers at work.

COSHH Responsibilities

COSHH health and safety legislation requires employers to control substances that are hazardous to employee health and anyone who comes to your premises. Control measures must be implemented and monitored by a competent person with appropriate training.

Each workplace is different and will need its own processes. However, to ensure some standardisation that protects employees, there are some essential COSHH responsibilities.

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COSHH legislation outlines responsibilities for both employees and employers to ensure a safe working environment for everyone.

Employers responsibilities and legal requirements

Employers have the responsibility to educate and inform staff on the procedures, how to complete tasks safely and supply the correct equipment.

1. Keep regular observations for tasks that involve these substances.
2. Provide the right health care and checks for staff, whilst in contact with substances.
3. Supply PPE (Personal Protective Equipment), such as eye protection and noise protection equipment. (Also check if the fit is appropriate for workers and whether any PPE needs replacing).
4. Check employees are carrying out tasks as they are supposed to. For example, are they wearing the correct PPE? Are they handling the substances correctly?
5. Prevent and control employees' exposure to any hazardous substances.
6. Supplying adequate COSHH training to staff.
7. Provide accident plans for when accidents happen.
8. Provide COSHH risk assessments.
9. Regularly conduct and update risk assessments.
10. Report any areas of concern to management or via our company's miss reporting.
11. Report any serious issues through RIDDOR.
12. Inspect and review your control measures regularly.
13. Check the safety data sheet given by your supplier.

COSHH risk Assessment

Employees have the responsibility to ensure that they conduct their daily tasks safely and don't cause harm to themselves or others. They should consider:

1. Helping their employees create a safe working environment and abide by the regulations set in the workplace.

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2. Following the procedures put in place to stop accidents and overexposure which causes harm.
3. Wearing the correct PPE, such as eye protection and noise protection.
4. Ensuring the PPE is stored correctly and returned to its correct storage facilities.
5. Correctly reporting any accidents/spillages/breakages of equipment etc.
6. Attending medical check-ups.
(Some workplaces provide medical check-ups to ensure their workers are safe while working with hazardous substances).
7. Using any cleaning and showering facilities that are provided by employers.
8. Keeping up to date with training provided.

COSHH control measures

The last step in your risk assessment is implementing adequate control measures to prevent or reduce exposure and minimise risk. So what are some measures you can implement?

An example of a control measure is PPE (personal protective equipment) as this minimises exposure. However, the ideal control measure would control the substance itself rather than minimising exposure to it.

The first and most significant is a review of the exposure itself. Are employees exposed to hazardous waste materials as part of a work process—is it a major component of their role?

If yes, ask yourself whether you can change the process to reduce risk. If the answer is “no” then you should look at other control measures. You can usually separate these into three separate categories:

Containment

Could you create a specific contained area for harmful substances? This will help reduce the number of substances being breathed in or affecting your employee's lungs.

Could you change the way emissions are released into the environment? Installing equipment to strip the harmful substances from emissions before they are released into the atmosphere.

Substitute

Look into whether the hazardous substance can be replaced by a less hazardous substance.

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Many hazardous cleaning chemicals can be replaced by less hazardous substances that do not require a COSHH assessment, for example most schools do not use bleach and use a less hazardous alternative.

Systems of work

Look into how you can restrict access to certain areas of your workplace where hazardous substances are being used or produced. Particularly to those without appropriate training. You should ensure that substances are stored properly, clearly labelled, and kept in the appropriate containers.

Cleaning

Ensuring your workplace is clean can help prevent people from breathing in or being affected by hazardous substances. Changing work surfaces to smooth worktops can make them easier to clean and prevent substances or dust from becoming trapped.

You should ensure that your team has the appropriate equipment to clean spillages quickly and safely. Any accidents must be recorded in an accident book.

How to write a COSHH risk assessments

Conducting a COSHH assessment in the workplace is vital if your employees are likely to be exposed to any harmful substances.

To ensure you've taken adequate precautions against any risk, you should detail and record your findings.

However, putting together a COSHH template and ensuring that it is fit for purpose for your workplace can be time-consuming. That's why Croner can support with this process.

Get expert help

Croner offers practical COSHH training to keep your workers safe, whatever position they work in. We offer manual handling assessment training, practical training, and more.

It is essential you correctly manage Health and Safety at work to stay both legally compliant and profitable. With Croner's help, you can ensure your staff are professionally trained, avoid accidents before they occur, and protect your business from risk.

As a partnership member, you can access complementary support from [Croner](#).

So, for answers to all your COSHH questions, support with employee training, or advice on any other health & safety topic, speak to one of our advice line experts today on [0844 561 8133](tel:08445618133) and quote your CGL reference number.

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