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## **Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Safe Working Practices**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1988 are wide-reaching and encompass all manner of premises. Managers should have carried out “suitable and sufficient” assessments of risks to health arising from exposure to such substances used in connection with work.

Assessments should include:-

- Details of all substances used.
- Where they are kept and used.
- How they are used.
- Their effect on health if persons are exposed to them.
- Details of all persons exposed or who could be exposed.
- Details of measures required to control exposure.
- If control measures include engineering controls, their use, maintenance, examination, testing and monitoring of environment.
- Where appropriate, health surveillance.

Such assessments should be reviewed and updated wherever and whenever changes in working practices occur, or even where no alteration in working procedures has taken place to ensure that they remain a true reflection of current practices.

All control measures prescribed must be maintained by means of regular checks and testing and if any prove not to be effectively used or applied then remedial action taken.

If part of the control measures involve the use of engineering controls such as processing/handling equipment, local exhaust ventilation or extraction plant, or any plant, processes or systems designed to control, contain or confine contamination whether under normal conditions or in the event of leakage or spillage, then weekly visual checks should be made and servicing and maintenance carried out as recommended by the manufacturers.

In addition, examination and testing by a competent person is required at intervals of 14 months and may require additional testing as identified by the assessment. The findings of examinations should be compared with the assessment requirements. Any defects discovered must be remedied within a time scale set by the examiner.

Finally, monitoring of exposure to hazards to health should be undertaken to ensure that the assessment, control measures, maintenance and examinations are effective.

## **BACKGROUND**

The COSHH Regulations are the main piece of legislation covering control of risks from chemicals and toxic substances generally. The broad scope of the regulations means that the same principles of control will be applied to all such substances (except lead, asbestos and radioactive substances where existing regulations continue to apply).

In essence, the regulations require employers to make an assessment of the risk to health that may arise from the use of substances at the workplace, establish and maintain the necessary control measures, and, provide monitoring of exposure and health surveillance. The regulations are supported by Approved Codes of Practice (ACoPs) and other guidance dealing with the regulations themselves and specific substances or classes of substance.

The following explanation sets out the main features of COSHH and produces a step-by-step guide to what employers must do to comply with the regulations.

## **SCOPE**

The COSHH Regulations apply to all substances classified as being very toxic, harmful, corrosive, or irritant under the Classification, Packaging & Labelling of Dangerous Substances Regulations 1989. They also apply to all other substances hazardous to health arising from work activities, including mixtures and compounds. In addition, the regulations apply to micro-organisms but do not cover the hazard of infection arising directly from a person suffering from a disease (except where that person is an in-patient at a hospital).

Certain existing prohibitions on very dangerous substances are continued (i.e. the Carcinogenic Substances Regulations) and there will be revisions in future in line with EC Directives.

## **ASSESSMENT**

The key provision of COSHH, from which other elements follow, is the requirement in Regulation 6 for the employer to carry out an assessment of likely risks to health to his employees arising from exposure to hazardous substances. The purpose of such an assessment, which, in all but the simplest cases needs to be in writing, is to enable a decision to be made about measures necessary to control substances hazardous to health arising from any work activity. It allows the employer to show: all the factors pertinent to the work have been considered; and informed and correct judgement has been reached about the risks and the steps which need to be taken to achieve and maintain adequate control; the need for monitoring exposure at the workplace; and the need for health surveillance. HSE guidance on assessment stresses that it should allow for a systematic review to consider which substances or types of substances workers are liable to encounter, what are the effects of those substances, where the substances are likely to be present and the ways and the extent to which any groups could potentially be exposed. Under the regulations and the general ACoP,

the degree of detail involved in its preparation has to be commensurate with the nature and degree of risk arising from the work. Key issues here concern:

The degree of detail and rigour appropriate to the assessment procedure in various circumstances.

- The competence and qualifications of persons carrying out the assessment.
- The degree of reliance to be placed on manufacturers' and suppliers' information.
- The need for written procedures and records; and Consultation with trade union representatives.

## **CONTROL**

Once the employer has identified a potential risk to health, under Regulation 7, they must ensure that the exposure of workers is either prevented or adequately controlled. Inhalation of substances assigned a maximum exposure limit (MEL) should not exceed those limits and should be reduced below them to the greatest extent that is reasonably practicable. Inhalation of substances which have been assigned an occupational exposure standard (OES) should be reduced to that standard. If exposure exceeds the OES, control will still be deemed to be adequate provided that the employer has identified why the OES has been exceeded and they are taking appropriate steps to comply with OES as soon as is reasonably practicable. In all cases, prevention or adequate control of exposure should be achieved by measures other than personal protective equipment (PPE) to the greatest extent that is reasonably practicable - i.e. the use of engineering controls is the first objective.

## **LIST OF CONTROL MEASURES**

Regulation 8 requires every employer who provides any control measure to ensure that it is properly used and every worker to make full and proper use of any control measures provided.

## **MAINTENANCE, EXAMINATION AND TESTING**

Under Regulation 9 every employer who provides any control measure to comply with Regulation 7 (i.e. to control the exposure of workers) should ensure that it is maintained in efficient working order and in good repair. The employer should ensure that thorough examinations and tests of engineering controls are carried out; in the case of local exhaust ventilation plan this should be done at least once every 12 months. Respiratory protective equipment has to be examined at suitable intervals, and, for all control measures a record (or summary) of the examinations has to be kept for five years.

The objective of this regulation is to ensure that all control measures which have been provided to meet the requirements of Regulation 7(1) perform as originally intended, thereby continuing to effectively prevent or adequately control exposure. The nature and content of the thorough examination and test depend on the particular engineering controls under consideration and the nature and degree of risk posed by the hazardous substance.

## **MONITORING EXPOSURE**

Under Regulation 10 monitoring of exposure should be carried out when it is required to ensure that exposure is adequately controlled. It is required when failure or deterioration of the control measures could result in a serious risk to health or where it is necessary to demonstrate that a MEL or OES is not exceeded. A record should be kept showing when the monitoring was done, what monitoring procedures were adopted and what the results were.

**HEALTH SURVEILLANCE**

Regulation 11 requires that, where it is necessary for the protection of the health of workers, the employer should ensure that they are under suitable health surveillance. Health surveillance should be treated as being appropriate where the worker is exposed to one of the substances in Schedule 6 of the regulations which lists a range of substances where statutory medical examinations are required under existing legislation.

Health surveillance also has to be carried out where the exposure of the worker is such that an identifiable disease or adverse health effect may be related to the exposure, where there is a reasonable likelihood that the disease or effect may occur under the particular conditions of work and there are valid techniques for detecting signs of the disease or the effect. Any judgement as to the likelihood that a disease or adverse health effect may occur must be related to the nature and degree of exposure. If, following assessment, it can be shown that it is most unlikely that any disease or adverse health effect will result, then exposure can be deemed not to be significant and health surveillance is not required. Examples of health effects where health surveillance should be considered are given in the ACoP.

**INFORMATION, INSTRUCTION AND TRAINING**

Under Regulation 12 workers exposed to substances hazardous to health must be given sufficient information, instruction and training to enable them to know about the risks involved and the precautions that should be taken. They are also entitled to know the results of environmental monitoring and the collective results of any health surveillance.

**PROVISIONING**

All persons having the authority to issue official purchase orders must request from the supplier, all data on health and safety of the product concerned. The product must be delivered to the Head of Department in order for an assessment to be carried out before the substance is used in the workplace.

COSHH Flow chart

