

A wide range of dusts, chemicals, gases and fluids found in workplaces are hazardous to health. Acute or cumulative exposure to hazardous substances can lead to life changing conditions including lung cancer, heart disease and damage to internal organs. Even a relatively minor incident or exposure incident could lead to long term health conditions and psychological damage.

The effects of exposure to substances by inhalation, ingestion and contact with skin are not always immediately apparent and in some cases can take years to develop. Thousands of people die each year from illnesses caused by exposure to workplace chemicals and dusts and the costs of personal injury claims is significant.

Legal Requirements

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) requires employers to prevent or reduce employees' exposure to substances that are hazardous to health. Most businesses undertake processes that involve the use of substances and chemicals and should complete a COSHH risk assessment. This will involve

- Identification of substances used in your workplace and that your work processes create. Review the material safety data sheets (MSDS) from manufacturers or suppliers. Remember that some substances which could cause serious illnesses might not have a MSDS, such as dusts from cutting concrete. Many trade/ industry associations may have relevant information.
- Consider hazard symbols on Safety data sheets to provide information on the characteristics of the substance. Sections 2 and 16 cover the Dangers and sections 4 - 8 cover Emergencies, Storage and Handling.
- Consider the process, how substances in your workplace are used and how employees might be exposed. Key routes of exposure are **inhalation, ingestion, absorption through the skin, skin puncture and through the eyes due to gases, vapours and splashes.**



The COSHH assessment addresses the question of whether any exposure is harmful. If so you will need to prioritise and implement control measures to prevent exposure or reduce exposure to as low a level as reasonably practicable.

Control measures should be hierarchical based on the level of effectiveness i.e.

- Eliminate the harmful substances from your workplace.
- Use a safer substitute or safer form of the substance, e.g. reduce dust release by using a pellet form.
- Change the process to reduce exposure to the substance.
- Enclose the process to stop it reaching employees.
- Extract emissions of the substance close to the point where they are generated.
- Reduce the number of employees working near the hazardous substances.
- Provide personal protective equipment such as gloves, eye protection and respiratory protective equipment.

You must provide employees with relevant training, ensuring it is kept up to date, recorded and refreshed.

Any equipment used to control exposure, including PPE, needs to be maintained in good working order. Appoint a competent person in your business to be responsible for the effective operation of control equipment. If local exhaust ventilation is used it needs to be examined and tested; depending on the process between 1 month and 14 months.

Some substances will have Workplace Exposure Limits to comply with; it may be necessary to arrange for monitoring (potentially continuous) of exposure levels to ensure the exposure levels are known and adequately controlled.

Best Practice Standards

✓	Involve employees in finding ways to control hazardous substances.
✓	Keep details of the training content, training records and details of the processes and substances used.
✓	Focus on activities that may give increased exposure to hazardous substances such as clean up or maintenance work.
✓	Practice spillage clean up procedures to ensure that sudden and accidental exposure to harmful substances is minimised.
✓	Validate/test and record that controls are practical and effective.
✓	Ensure you have a user manual for control equipment and train the relevant staff. The manual should give instructions on how to keep the equipment running effectively.
✓	Keep records of maintenance checks and control actions addressed for at least five years.
✓	Provide training for employees on when and where to wear personal protective equipment, how to obtain it, wear it and look after it. PPE should be issued on a signed receipt basis and records kept of PPE issue, instruction and training.
✓	Provide face fit training for those employees who need to wear respiratory protective equipment. Provide training on how to take off gloves without contaminating the skin for those employees who need to wear gloves.
✓	Obtain references from local exhaust ventilation contractors and validate they are members of a suitable body such as the British Occupational Hygiene Society.
✓	Consider how emergencies could involve hazardous substances. Produce and communicate any control steps within emergency plans.



Guidance and Useful Information

- www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/essentials
- www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg136.pdf
- www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg174.pdf
- www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/guidance/g409.pdf

Further Information

For more information please visit: www.qbeurope.com/rs or email us on RS@uk.qbe.com

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6370GC/CONTROL OF SUBSTANCES HAZARDOUS TO HEALTH/JUN2016
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