**Scope**

All employers are required to assess and deal with any risk to the health, safety and welfare of staff, service users, pupils, visitors and contractors. This includes cleaning and building maintenance staff and anyone else who may be affected by our actions such as other occupiers of shared premises.

**The why, what and how?**

Using chemicals or other hazardous substances at work can put people's health at risk. Most businesses use substances, or products that are mixtures of substances and some processes create substances. These could cause harm to employees, contractors and other people.

Control of substances hazardous to health (COSHH) is the law that requires employers to control substances that are hazardous to health and specifies essesential steps to control hazardous substances to protect people exposed to them.

Managers are responsible for ensuring that employees and others who have to use substances that fall within the COSHH regime are protected from the risks.

**You can prevent or reduce workers exposure to hazardous substances by:**

* finding out what the health hazards are
* deciding how to prevent harm to health (COSHH risk assessment)
* providing control measures to reduce harm to health
* making sure they are used
* keeping all control measures in good working order
* providing information, instruction and training for employees and others
* providing monitoring and health surveillance in appropriate cases
* planning for emergencies.

In the course of their duties, KCC employees can encounter a wide range of substances that may be hazardous to health.

**Substances can take many forms and include:**

* chemicals
* products containing chemicals
* fumes
* dusts
* vapours
* mists
* gases and asphyxiating gases and
* biological agents (germs)
* germs that cause diseases such as leptospirosis or legionnaires disease.

**Examples of the effects of hazardous substances include:**

* skin irritation, dermatitis or burns as a result of skin contact
* asthma as a result of developing an allergy to substances used at work
* losing consciousness as a result of being overcome by toxic fumes
* cancer, which may appear long after the exposure to the chemical that caused it
* infection from bacteria and other micro-organisms (biological agents).

**Examples of when you may come across hazardous substances include:**

* substances used directly in work activities (adhesives, paints, cleaning agents)
* substances generated during work activities (fumes from soldering / welding, sanding and grinding)
* naturally occurring substances (wood dust)
* biological agents such as bacteria and other micro-organisms (bodily fluids, contaminated water (ponds & streams).

**Risk Assessment:**

If there are hazardous substances present in the workplace, you are required to carry out COSHH risk assessments to ensure such substances are used safely so that the risk of exposure is prevented or controlled.

A risk assessment should cover specific actions and events, such as the use, storage and disposal of the substance, the use of personal protective equipment, monitoring of exposure and health surveillance. It also needs to cover the requirement to provide suitable information, instruction and supervision for staff undertaking any tasks where chemicals are used.

Refer to the KNET/KELSI sequence of steps to control workplace COSHH risks to ensure that you are following the COSHH management cycle.

**What you will need to assess the risk:**

* COSHH risk assessment template
* material safety data sheets for each substance used (obtain from product manufacturer’s website)
* a copy of the EH40 guidance to refer to if the product has a workspace exposure limit (WEL)
* knowledge of how the task will be carried out, how much of the substance (or mix of substances) will be used, how long the task takes, where the task takes place and who else could be exposed other than the main user
* supplier or trade association health and safety information where you might not have specific advice available for your work process which is producing a hazardous substance (where applicable)
* COSHH training record form.

**COSHH Symbols:**

Refer to the COSHH symbols document on KNET/KELSI which outlines the most commonly used type of hazard symbol when completing your COSHH risk assessment.

**Steps to follow to help complete your COSHH risk assessment:**

1. identify the hazards
2. decide who might be harmed and how
3. evaluate the risks and decide on precautions
4. record your findings and implement them
5. review your assessment and update if necessary.

**Information:**

Read the COSHH data sheet to gain knowledge of the hazards relating to the use of the substance and the correct dilution (if applicable) of the chemical along with the correct method of using it. Follow the safety precautions that must be taken, including the safe storage of the chemical and the prescription of first aid measures and any personal protection equipment that should be used when handling the chemical.

**Think about the task:**

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

* breathing in gases, fumes, mist or dust
* contact with the skin
* swallowing
* contact with the eyes
* skin puncture.

**Exposure by breathing in gases, fumes, mist or dust:**

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 such as the liver.

**Exposure by skin contact:**

Some substances damage skin, while others pass through it and damage other parts of the body. Skin can get contaminated by direct contact with the substance if you touch it, dip your hands in it, splashing or landing on the skin from contaminated surfaces which includes contact with contamination inside protective gloves.

**Exposure by swallowing:**

People transfer chemicals from their hands to their mouths by eating or smoking 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 needlestick injuries are rare, but can involve infections or very harmful substances.

**Implement control measures**

Control measures must be considered carefully and no measures, however practical,

can work unless they are used properly.

Hierachy of the priority control measures for COSHH are outlined below and should be considered when completing your COSHH risk assessment.

**1.** eliminate the use of a harmful product or substance and use a safer one

**2.** use a safer form of the product e.g. 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 anda respirator.

PPE must fit the wearer.

The heirachy of controls outlined above should be considered prior to the issue of protective personal equipment which should be used as a last resort. It should be noted that whilst PPE offers some form of protection for the user, should it fail the user is exposed to the full force of the hazard. It is normal to use PPE in conjunction with other control measures. PPE must fit the wearer and If your control measures include control measures 5, 6 and 7, make sure they all work together.

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.

**Instruction/information/training**

Explain to staff, and anyone else who needs to know, what the dangers are for any activity where there is a risk from hazardous substances. Check that staff fully understand the safe operating procedures for the task. It is poor practice just to hand them a page of written information. Use the COSHH training record form to show that staff have received training on the safe use of each substance.

**Frequently asked questions**

**What is a substance hazardous to health?**

Substances hazardous to health are defined under COSHH as those that are: 'Very Toxic, Toxic, Corrosive, Harmful or Irritant.'

**What is a Safety Data Sheet?**

It is a manufacturers information sheet whichprovides information on chemical products that help users of those chemicals to make a risk assessment. They describe the hazards the chemical presents, and give information on handling, storage and emergency measures in case of an accident.

**When should I carry out a COSHH assessment?**

A COSHH assessment should be carried out whenever a workplace task involves using or coming into contact with a substance that is hazardous to health, before the task is carried out.

**How do I carry out a COSHH assessment?**

Look at each substance being used to see its hazard classification (check symbol on the product) and identify how it is harmful. Identify who might be harmed and how by thinking about the task and how workers might be exposed. Implement appropriate control measures which are always a mixture of equipment and safe ways of working to reduce the exposure. The right standard operating procedure should combine the right equipment with the right way of working, this means instructing, training and supervising workers undertaking the tasks where they are exposed to hazardous substances.

**How do I ensure the safe disposal of waste?**

Any waste products that could be classed as hazardous or harmful to the environment must be disposed of in line with the advice given by the Health and Safety Executive.

**What is a Workplace Exposure Limit (WELs)?**

Put simply, it is the maximum amount of time any individual should be exposed to a certain substance before they are likely to be harmed by it. The substances involved are listed in the document “EH40” produced annually by the HSE.

Few KCC establishments are likely to come into contact with any of these substances and those that do should have the latest EH40 document. If any establishment believes that it may have a harmful substance on the premises they should seek advice from a Health and Safety Adviser on how to deal with it.

**What should I do once I’ve completed the COSHH risk assessment?**

All those involved with the chemicals/process must be made aware of the risk assessment findings and recommendations and given any required information, instruction and supervision for the task where the chemicals are being used. This should include the hazards, control measures including safe systems of work and personal protective equipment (PPE).

The documents must be kept readily accessible to all those who may need to know the results, including staff, volunteers, health and safety staff, HSE or local inspectors and other third parties. Consideration should be given to keeping a log of all chemicals on the premises, their hazard status and where they are stored. A list of the chemicals and the location should be recorded in the fire log to inform Kent Fire and Rescue, should a fire occur.

**When should I review the COSHH assessment?**

COSHH risk assessments should be reviewed on an annual basis, however there are other occasions when you may be required to review your COSHH risk assessment outlined below:

* after an accident/incident
* ill health occurrence
* significant change in the work or work methods of the substance being used
* change of substance has taken place
* modification to plant or equipment which might affect the reaction of the chemical being used.

A review should also take place if there is new information on health risks, technologies changes or a safer substitute becoming available.

**Can I use bleach in my working environment?**

KCC do not permit the use of bottled bleach in any of their establishments, however bleach tablets are permitted for the purpose of infection control, e.g. deep clean situations like Norovirus.

Bleach has to be risk assessed like any other chemical and a decision has to be made at the end of that assessment by the assessor as to its suitability for that specific task.

Read the HSE catering information guidance sheet No 22 - Safe use of cleaning substances in the hospitality industry. For issues relating to harmful gases caused by mixing bleach and acidic toilet cleaners or ammonia.