

COSHH:

Hazardous Substances at Work

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health — identifying hazards, Safety Data Sheets, WELs, PPE and what to do if you're exposed.



Last reviewed: August 2026



HSE · COSHH Regs 2002



England, Scotland and Wales

ukworkrights.co.uk

In Northern Ireland, similar duties come from Northern Ireland's own health and safety law. Contact HSENI (Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland), not the HSE.

What substances does COSHH cover?

- **Chemicals** — cleaning products, solvents, paints, adhesives
- **Dusts** — wood dust, flour dust, silica, coal dust
- **Fumes** — welding fumes, paint spray, exhaust emissions
- **Biological agents** — bacteria, viruses, fungi (e.g. in healthcare or laboratories)
- **Nanomaterials** — increasingly regulated
- Substances do **not** have to be obviously dangerous — flour, wood and silica are all COSHH hazards
- Employers must carry out a **COSHH assessment** for any hazardous substance used at work

SAFETY DATA SHEETS (SDS)

Every hazardous substance must have an SDS — available from the supplier. It tells you the hazards, how to handle it safely, what PPE to use and what to do in an emergency. You have the right to see it.

COSHH control measures — in order

- 1 Eliminate**
Remove the hazardous substance entirely. Use a non-hazardous alternative if one exists.
- 2 Substitute**
Replace with a less hazardous substance or form (e.g. water-based instead of solvent-based paint).
- 3 Enclose**
Contain the process so the substance cannot escape into the working environment.
- 4 Control — local exhaust ventilation (LEV)**
Extract fumes or dust at source before they enter the breathing zone.
- 5 PPE — last resort**
Respiratory protection, gloves, eye protection. Only after all other controls have been applied. Must be the right type for the substance.

KEY FACTS

13,000

Deaths per year estimated from occupational lung disease in Great Britain (HSE)

500+

Workplace exposure limits (WELs) published by HSE
— EH40

2002

Year COSHH Regulations were last consolidated —
still current law

8hrs

Standard time period over which WELs are
measured (TWA)

Silica

One of the most dangerous workplace dusts — kills
construction workers every week

SDS

Safety Data Sheet — 16 sections, must be provided
by suppliers, available on request

Frequently asked questions

Q Does COSHH apply to cleaning products?

Yes. Many everyday cleaning products contain hazardous substances — bleach, disinfectants, descalers. A COSHH assessment is required, and workers must be trained in safe use and storage.

Q What is a Workplace Exposure Limit (WEL)?

A WEL is the maximum concentration of an airborne substance that a worker should be exposed to, averaged over a reference period (usually 8 hours). WELs are published in HSE document EH40. Employers must not exceed them and must aim below them.

Q What should I do if I'm accidentally exposed?

Follow the emergency procedures in the SDS immediately — this may involve flushing with water, fresh air, or emergency medical attention. Report the incident in the accident book. Seek medical advice even if you feel fine — some effects are delayed.

Q Can I refuse to work with a hazardous substance?

Yes — if you believe the risk is serious and imminent and adequate controls are not in place. Report it to your supervisor and, if necessary, to HSE. You cannot be dismissed for raising genuine safety concerns.

Delivery notes & attendance record

Before you start

Bring a real product from your own stores and pass it round. Most people have never read a safety data sheet for a substance they use daily.

Questions to ask the team

1. Which substances do we use here that you would call hazardous?
2. Where are our COSHH assessments and safety data sheets kept?
3. What do the hazard pictograms on the container in front of you actually mean?
4. If you splashed something in your eye right now, where is the nearest eyewash?

The law behind this talk

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (regs. 6, 7 and 12); Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2(2)(c)

Employers must give workers comprehensible information, instruction and training on the risks they face — Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2(2)(c) and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 reg. 10. Keep the record below as evidence that you did.

Attendance record

Topic

COSHH: Hazardous Substances at Work

Date

Site / location

Delivered by

Actions agreed

Next talk due

Attendees

Name

Signature

Use the Print handout button to print this record. General guidance only, not legal advice. This toolbox talk is generic material and is not a substitute for a suitable and sufficient risk assessment by a competent person. Employers remain responsible for their duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

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COSHH

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hse.gov.uk

ACAS

0300 123 1100

acas.org.uk

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COSHH

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