



Working with hazardous substances

A guide to preventing exposure to harmful substances

April 2022





Because
Experience
Counts

**With our extensive
experience, we can help
you seize new opportunities
following the pandemic.**

Find out more:

T. +44 (0)20 3510 3510

www.britsafe.org



Contents

What the law says	5
Assessing the risks	5
Controlling exposure	6
Control measures	8
Personal protective equipment	10
Information and training	11
Monitoring and surveillance	11
Consultation and review	12
Skin problems	12
Irritant contact dermatitis	13
Allergic contact dermatitis	13
Flammable substances	14
The asbestos threat	15
Preventing asbestos exposure	16
Duty to manage asbestos	17
Finally...	18
Recommended reading	19
Further help	20

Find us on:

/britishsafetycouncil
@britsafe
linkedin.com/company/british-safety-council
www.britsafe.org
sm.britsafe.org

Editor:

Thomas Tevlin
E tom.tevlin@britsafe.org

Graphics and design:

Dean Papadopoulos
E publications@britsafe.org

Advertisement sales:

E jas@membertrade.co.uk

Subscriptions:

E customerservice@britsafe.org

Subscription rates:

UK members: £40
UK non-members: £60
International members: £100
International non-members: £150

Introduction

One of the most common and serious risks to the health and safety of people at work is exposure to hazardous substances. Whether it be skin damage from repeated contact with chemicals, or serious and fatal lung diseases caused by inhaling dusts, gases, fumes and vapours, it is clear hazardous substances can cause immense harm to workers' health.

However, the risk of workers suffering ill health from hazardous substances – and any associated safety dangers, such as fire and explosions – can be eliminated or controlled, providing employers carefully assess the risks and implement suitable precautions to prevent or adequately control exposure.

This guide provides an overview of some of the key steps to take, based on HSE guidance.

Thomas Tevlin

Editor



The Guide is published by the British Safety Council,
70 Chancellors Road, London, W6 9RS, United Kingdom

Working with hazardous substances

A huge variety of substances used or created at work can pose serious harm to human health if they are inhaled, come into contact with the skin or enter the body in some other way, such as by being ingested.

These include substances supplied for use – such as chemicals, solvents, lubricants, paints, inks, adhesives and bleach – and those generated during work processes, such as wood and flour dust. Other common examples include mist from oils and water-based fluids used to provide cooling and lubrication for metalworking machines; fumes and gases from welding and soldering; and dust created by the cutting, grinding and abrasive blasting of materials, such as concrete, mortar, bricks and sandstone.

The range of hazardous substances used and created at work is so broad that the resulting health problems can range from short-term skin, nose and throat irritation right through to serious and fatal lung diseases and cancers.

As a result, a wide range of workers face a risk of ill health due to exposure to hazardous substances, including:

- **Cleaners and catering staff** – who may come into contact with solvents found in cleaning materials
- **Engineering workers** – who can inhale fumes, dusts and gases during tasks such as welding, soldering, cutting, abrasive blasting and machining metals; and can suffer skin damage from contact with substances such as lubricants, adhesives, degreasers and

metalworking fluids

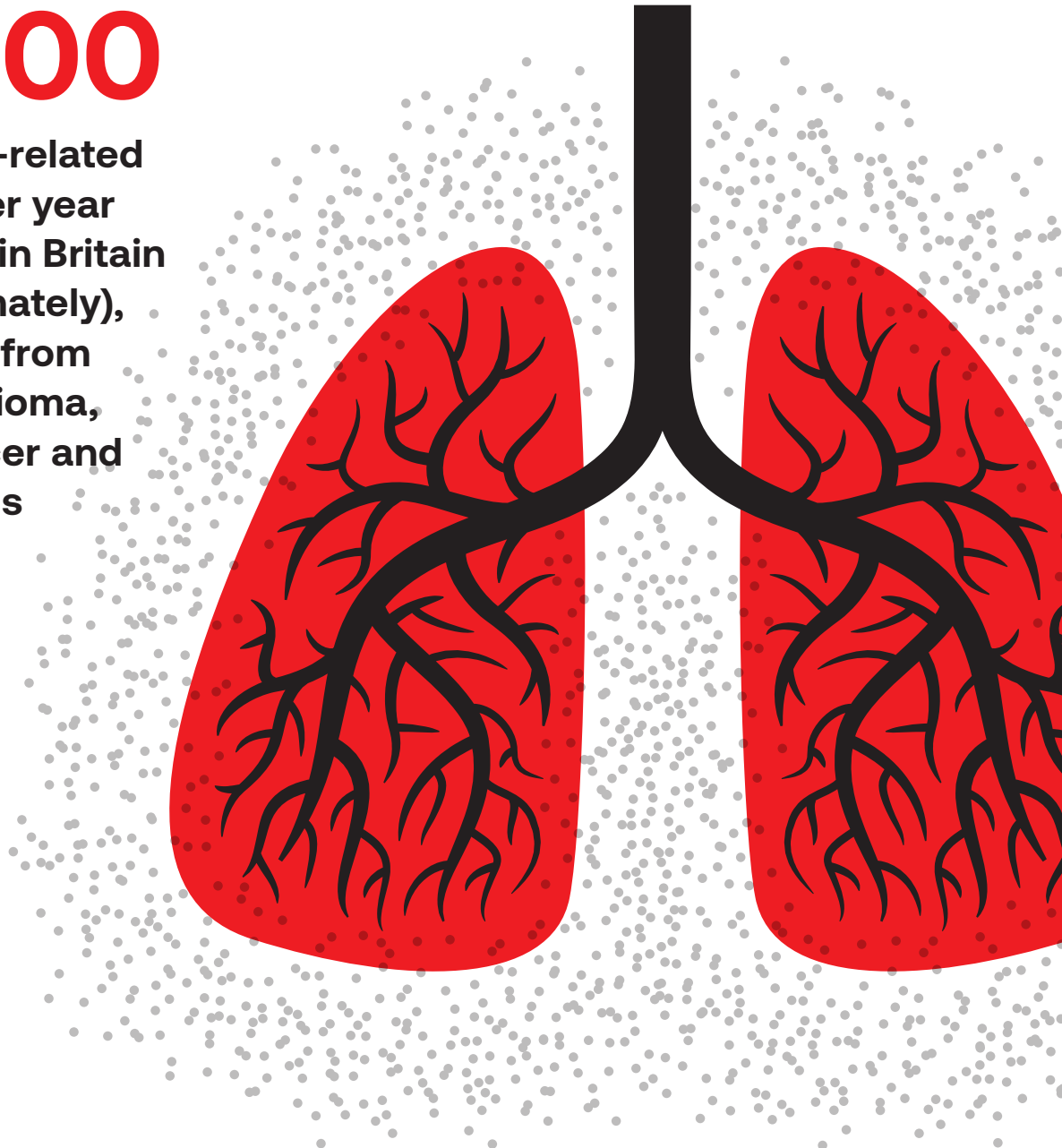
- **Construction workers** – who can be exposed to harmful airborne substances, such as silica dust from cutting concrete, bricks and mortar; asbestos fibres in buildings; fumes from epoxy resins; solvent vapour from some paints, thinners and glues; and skin exposure to harmful substances, such as wet cement, degreasers, bitumen and solvents in some paints and glues
- **Woodworkers, such as carpenters and joiners** – who can breathe in or suffer skin exposure to substances such as wood dusts, adhesives and varnishes
- **Beauticians** – who can suffer dermatitis from skin contact with solvents in nail varnish removers; and chest wheezing, chest tightness and asthma from inhaling dust filings from artificial nails, for example
- **Bakers** – who can inhale flour dust, or dusts from ingredients such as soya.

“
**A wide range
of workers face
health risks
from hazardous
substances.**

Some facts and numbers

5,000

asbestos-related deaths per year currently in Britain (approximately), including from mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis



12,000

lung disease deaths each year in Britain estimated to be linked to past exposures at work

17,000

estimated new cases of breathing or lung problems caused or made worse by work in Britain in 2020-21

142,000

people who have ever worked in Britain reported suffering breathing or lung problems caused or made worse by their work in 2020-21

Sources: HSE/Labour Force Survey 2020/21 (LFS - estimates based on self-reports by workers), [hse.gov.uk/statistics](https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics)

Working with hazardous substances



Employers should always try prevent exposure to a hazardous substance if it is reasonably practicable.

Exposure to hazardous substances can occur in a number of ways, including by breathing them in – when the substances then attack the nose, throat or lungs. Once breathed in, the substances can also pass from the lungs into the bloodstream and onto other tissues and organs in the body, causing damage elsewhere, such as to the liver.

Some substances can also directly damage the skin by coming into contact with it and some substances can also pass through the skin and cause damage elsewhere in the body – such as cancer and kidney disease.

Workers can also ingest hazardous substances by transferring traces of them from their hands to their mouths if they fail to adequately clean their hands. Other exposure routes and damage include eye

irritation and inflammation from exposure to vapours, gases and dusts and skin burns and damage to the eyes from direct contact with caustic substances.

The health effects of exposure to hazardous substances can be immediate, such as dizziness or stinging eyes, or they can take several years to develop, such as certain lung diseases. Also, many of the long-term or chronic health effects cannot be cured once they develop.

The ill health effects and diseases include:

- **Being overcome by toxic fumes** – which can cause serious damage to health and sometimes prove fatal
- **Respiratory cancers** – from exposure to substances such as asbestos, welding fume and silica dust found in materials such as concrete

- **Chronic pulmonary obstructive disease (COPD), such as bronchitis and emphysema** – a group of serious and often fatal long-term lung diseases that have been linked to exposure to certain dusts, chemicals, fumes and gases; such as silica dust, welding fume and isocyanates in some paints
- **Silicosis** – an irreversible and sometimes fatal lung disease caused by exposure to silica dust created when cutting materials such as concrete, mortar and sandstone
- **Asthma** – from exposure to substances such as wood dust, metalworking fluid mist, solder fume, isocyanates found in some paints, sealers and adhesives, substances in some cleaning products and flour dust
- **Skin irritation and disease** – for example, from exposure to chemicals, wet cement, metalworking fluids, printing inks, solvents in paints, certain beauty treatment products and prolonged or frequent contact with water, soaps and detergents.

It is also important to remember that some substances – such as solvent-based products – can give off flammable vapours which can ignite and cause fires. Some dusts – such as wood dust – can also form an explosive atmosphere and explode if a source of ignition is present, such as a naked flame or sparks.

What the law says

There are a number of health and safety laws that specifically require employers to protect their workers and others – such

as contractors and members of the public who may be nearby – from exposure to hazardous substances.

In particular, the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH) require employers to prevent – or to adequately control – exposure to hazardous substances to protect the health of their employees. There are also separate regulations on preventing employees from being exposed to two specific substances – asbestos and lead.

Under COSHH, employers must:

- Assess the health risks from hazardous substances
- Prevent or control employees' exposure to hazardous substances through the use of appropriate control measures
- Ensure control measures are properly used and maintained
- Provide employees with appropriate information, instruction and training on the risks from hazardous substances
- Where appropriate, provide health surveillance for workers exposed to hazardous substances
- Where appropriate, monitor the level of hazardous substances employees are exposed to
- Draw up plans and procedures to deal with accidents, incidents and emergencies involving hazardous substances, where necessary.

Assessing the risks

The first step in assessing and controlling risks under COSHH is to identify the hazardous substances workers and

Working with hazardous substances

others may be exposed to and the possible routes of exposure. A decision can then be taken on whether the existing control measures are adequate or if more precautions need to be taken.

When assessing risks, employers should consider both substances that have been supplied for use – such as chemicals in containers, adhesives, lubricants, degreasers and beauty products containing solvents – and those that may be created by work processes. The latter will include substances such as construction dusts; welding fumes; dusts from abrasive wheels or baking processes; isocyanates from paint-spraying; and dust filings from artificial nails in beauty treatments.

All possible routes of exposure – inhalation, skin contact or absorption and swallowing – must also be considered.

If a product is classed as ‘dangerous for supply’ – such as chemicals, solvents, paints or bleach – it will carry hazard warning symbols that provide an indication of danger, which can help when beginning to assess the health and safety risks it poses. The supplier of a substance classed as ‘dangerous for supply’ must also provide a safety data sheet giving information on the health and safety hazards it poses and ways of adequately controlling exposure to it. This can provide help when deciding on the most appropriate exposure control measures for its safe use.

Once the hazardous substances and routes of exposure have been identified, employers must assess the risk of damage to workers’ health and decide

on the most suitable exposure controls. In doing so, the following steps should be taken, in order of priority:

- Eliminate the use of the harmful substance or product
- Use a safer form of the substance or product
- Change the process to emit less of the substance
- Enclose the process so the product does not escape
- Extract emissions of the substance near the source
- Keep the number of workers at risk to a minimum
- Provide suitable personal protective equipment (PPE), such as gloves, coveralls and respirators.

Controlling exposure

Employers must first try to prevent exposure to a hazardous substance or process altogether if it is reasonably practicable to do so.

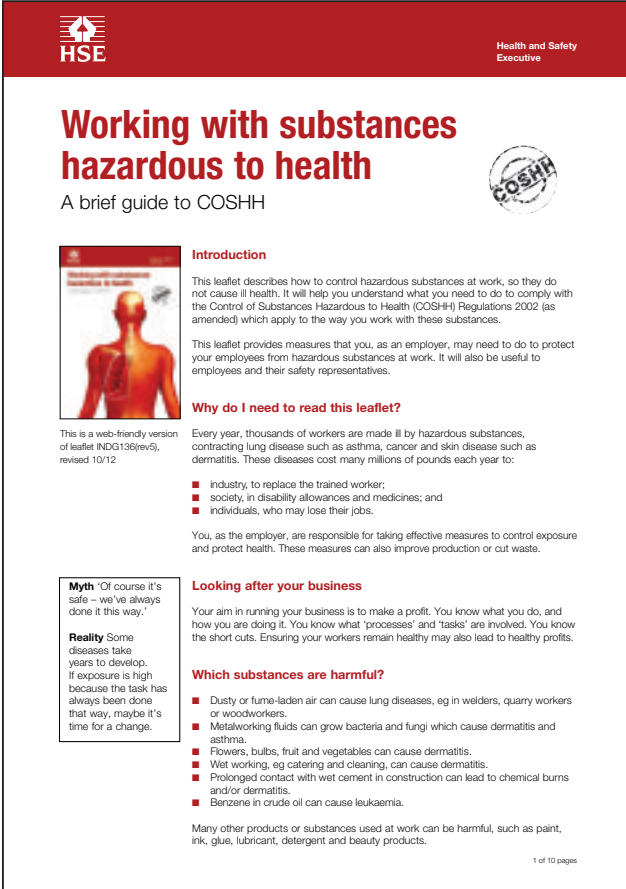
For example, it may be possible to use water-based rather than solvent-based products or, in construction, designers could avoid specifying the use of materials that contain high levels of silica dust. In the services sector, meanwhile, it may be possible to swop an irritant cleaning product for something milder.

However, if it is not reasonably practicable to completely prevent exposure, then employers must adequately control it, by following a hierarchy of steps. These are:

- Using a safer form of the substance – for example, minimising the creation

Free guidance:

Organisations such as HSE, BOHS, IOSH and No Time to Lose offer free guidance on managing the risks from hazardous substances.



The image shows the cover of a leaflet titled "Working with substances hazardous to health" from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The cover is white with a red header containing the HSE logo and the text "Health and Safety Executive". The title is in large, bold, black font. Below the title is a subtitle "A brief guide to COSHH" and a circular COSHH logo. The main content area is divided into sections: "Introduction" with a small image of a person's torso, "Why do I need to read this leaflet?", "Looking after your business", and "Which substances are harmful?". There are also "Myth" and "Reality" boxes on the left side. The bottom right corner indicates "1 of 10 pages".

HSE's guidance is at:
hse.gov.uk

of dust by specifying materials such as powders in pellet, paste or tablet form or in sealed, pre-packed bags, rather than weighing them out by hand; or using a solid rather than a liquid substance to avoid splashes

- Changing the process to emit less of the substance and reduce the risk of exposure – for example, reducing the temperature of a process to reduce the amount of vapour getting into the air
- Enclosing the process or activity to prevent or minimise the escape or release of the substance – for example, using a closed transfer or handling system or using sheeting or temporary screens to prevent dust escaping during tasks such as soft-strip demolition
- Extracting emissions of the substance near the source – for example, using local exhaust ventilation (LEV) equipment
- Keeping the number of workers at risk to a minimum – such as limiting the number of people near the work
- Providing suitable PPE.

HSE says the exposure controls should always be a combination of suitable control equipment and appropriate ways of working to prevent or reduce exposure. This means combining equipment, such as exhaust ventilation plant, with safe working practices, such as suitable instruction, training and supervision for workers. It also means maintaining the exposure control equipment.

Control equipment includes:

- Extraction systems – such as LEV systems that capture and extract

Working with hazardous substances

- dusts, mists, gases, vapour or fumes
- The use of water to suppress the creation of dust – for example, by attaching a hose to supply water directly to the blade of a cut-off saw to minimise dust when cutting up stone and concrete
- Spray booths that prevent paint fumes escaping.

LEV captures the contaminated air to prevent workers breathing it in and then filters and discharges it to a safe place or cleans it by removing the contaminants.

LEV includes on-tool extraction systems, which remove airborne contaminants as they are produced – for example, from a wood sander, soldering iron or concrete cutting saw. It also includes capturing hoods that can be positioned over a work bench or area and walk-in air extraction booths – for example, for use during paint spraying.

LEV must be checked regularly to ensure it is working effectively and must undergo a thorough examination and test by a competent person at least once every 14 months or more frequently when working with certain harmful substances.

Once the control measures have been decided upon, they must be backed up with safe working methods that eliminate or reduce the risk of harmful exposure.

This means providing employees with adequate information, instruction, training and supervision on how to work safely with hazardous substances and regularly checking the effectiveness of all the control measures – including equipment, ways of working and staff behaviour.

In summary, to achieve adequate

control of exposure to hazardous substances under COSHH, the risk of harm should be reduced to as low as is reasonably practicable and:

- All control measures must be in good working order
- Exposures must be below the Workplace Exposure Limit (a legal limit on the amount of certain substances that can be present in the workplace air), where one exists, and
- Exposure to substances that cause cancer, asthma or genetic damage must be reduced to the lowest level possible.

To help employers, HSE has developed a free webtool that provides basic advice on the appropriate control measures to adopt for certain substances and tasks.

[COSHH Essentials](#) provides general guidance on controlling exposure to certain substances – such as chemicals, solvents, isocyanates, dusts, welding and solder fume and vehicle exhaust fume. Employers can either follow ‘direct advice sheets’ for common tasks for their industry or enter information about the chemical or substance they are using into an e-tool to identify a generic exposure control guidance sheet to follow.

Control measures

A wealth of online advice on controlling exposure to hazardous substances in various tasks and industries is available from organisations such as HSE; the Breathe Freely lung disease campaign from the British Occupational Hygiene Society (BOHS); and IOSH’s No Time to

Lose occupational cancer campaign.
See the back pages for details.

Some common ways of preventing or controlling exposure in various tasks and industries include:

Construction

- Getting materials, such as concrete blocks or wood, pre-cut to the correct size off-site to minimise the need for on-site cutting and therefore dust creation
- Using a block splitter instead of a cut-off saw to reduce the amount of dust produced when cutting concrete blocks to size
- Fitting vacuum extraction equipment and water supply systems on power tools, such as cut-off saws and hand sanders, to both capture and damp down dust
- Using a different method of work – such as using a nail gun to direct fasten cable trays instead of drilling holes first
- Using a vacuum cleaner to clear up dust, such as wood dust, instead of brushing it up, which forces the dust into the air, where it can be breathed in.

Engineering

- Fitting enclosures around machinery – such as abrasive wheels, metalworking cutting machines and lathes – to stop substances such as metal cutting fluid mist escaping into the air
- Using powered extraction equipment on or around machines to capture and remove mist, dust or fume

- Vacuuming rather than hand brushing up dust
- Ensuring workers do not use a compressed air line to blow away dust from work surfaces or clothing, as this will disturb the dust and allow it to become inhaled.

Motor vehicle repair, transport and bus depots

- Reducing vehicle exhaust emissions inside garages, workshops and depots by turning off engines when not required; keeping doors and windows open where practicable; installing non-mechanical, fixed air vents and mechanical air extraction fans in the walls and ceilings; using tailpipe exhaust extraction systems. (Exposure to diesel engine exhaust emissions (DEEE) can cause short-term ill health effects, such as eye and lung irritation, and continuous long-term exposure to DEEEs can cause asthma, COPD and lung cancer.)

Vehicle paint spraying

- Providing an enclosed spray booth with suitable extraction and respiratory protective equipment that incorporates an airline.

Catering and food production

- Avoiding raising clouds of flour dust
- Using dust extraction plant and RPE in bakeries or flour mills
- Using dishwashers rather than washing up plates, utensils etc, to

Working with hazardous substances

prevent prolonged or frequent contact with water (particularly in combination with soaps and detergents), which can cause the skin disease dermatitis.

Beauty treatment

- Providing an extractor hood or down draught table for nail work and protective gloves etc
- Ensuring hairdressing salon workers wear disposable non-latex gloves when rinsing, shampooing, colouring, bleaching hair, to prevent hands coming into contact with the chemicals in hairdressing products,

and to prevent them coming into contact with water for long periods of time, both of which can cause skin irritation and damage.

Personal protective equipment

Another important control measure for work with hazardous substances is PPE. However, it should only be issued after other approaches – such as substitution of the substance and exhaust ventilation – have been implemented or tried and to support these measures. PPE includes:

- Eye protection – such as spectacles, goggles and facescreens

HSE warning on controlling welding fume exposure

In 2019 [HSE warned employers](#) to ensure they are adequately controlling workers' exposure to all types of welding fume and during all welding tasks. This came after new scientific evidence from the International Agency for Research on Cancer found that even exposure to mild steel welding fume can cause lung cancer and possibly kidney cancer in humans. It was previously thought the risk of lung cancer was only linked to welding stainless steels, as opposed to the more commonly used mild steel.

In a [safety alert](#), HSE said it would no longer accept any welding – including mild steel welding and welding outdoors – undertaken without suitable exposure control measures being in place, regardless of the duration. This is because there is no known level of safe

exposure to welding fume and general ventilation does not achieve adequate control of the exposure.

HSE added that effective engineering controls should be provided for all welding activities indoors – typically local exhaust ventilation (LEV) equipment. However, if LEV alone does not adequately control exposure, it should be supplemented with suitable respiratory protective equipment (RPE) to protect workers from the residual fume.

HSE added that appropriate RPE must be provided for welding outdoors, and welders must be given suitable instruction and training.

See:
[hse.gov.uk/welding](https://www.hse.gov.uk/welding)

- Breathing protection – respirators, air-fed helmets and breathing apparatus
- Body protection – boiler suits, specialist clothing or disposable overalls
- Hand and arm protection – gloves, gauntlets or mittens.

Any PPE provided must be properly selected, used and maintained. Workers, and those in charge of maintaining it, must therefore by law be given adequate information, instruction and training on its correct use and maintenance.

Detailed advice on the use of PPE can be found on the websites of organisations such as HSE and the Breathe Freely and No Time To Lose campaigns.

Information and training

Another vital step in controlling exposure is providing employees with appropriate information, instruction and training.

Essentially, this means that employees should be made fully aware of:

- The nature of the hazardous substances they work with
- Any health and safety risks that might arise from using or working with or near these substances
- How to use the control measures provided, including PPE
- The results of any exposure monitoring and the collective results of any health surveillance – without giving the names of individual employees
- The importance of reporting any faults they discover in the control measures
- Emergency procedures.

Employers must also prepare plans and procedures for dealing with

emergencies involving hazardous substances, such as a fire or spillage involving a chemical that could affect the health and safety of workers and others, such as the public. Where necessary, procedures should be in place for the safe evacuation of the workplace, dealing with any casualties and dealing with any fires, spills or damage.

Suitable communication systems – such as alarm signals – must also be established to warn people in the event of an emergency involving a hazardous substance.

Meanwhile, employees have a legal duty to cooperate with their employer in controlling exposure to hazardous substances. This means they must make full use of all the control measures and report any defects with them.

Monitoring and surveillance

Two other measures an employer may be required to implement if employees work with hazardous substances are exposure monitoring and health surveillance.

The concentration of hazardous substances in the air may need to be measured if the employer needs to ensure and/or demonstrate that:

- Exposures are below the relevant Workplace Exposure Limit or the Biological Monitoring Guidance Value; and/or
- The exposure control equipment or PPE is working effectively.

Monitoring normally involves sampling the air but it can also involve taking biological samples from workers – for example,

Working with hazardous substances

breath or urine samples.

Employers may also need to provide health surveillance for employees who work with hazardous substances to detect early signs of adverse health changes or diseases connected with the likely exposure.

Health surveillance is necessary when:

- There is a disease associated with the substance in use – for example, asthma, dermatitis or cancer
- It is possible to detect the disease or adverse change and reduce the risk
- of further harm, and
- The conditions in the workplace make it likely that the disease will appear.

Health surveillance can involve checks, assessments and examinations and must be carried out by a competent person.

It can range from basic health checks – for example, skin inspections for signs of rashes, undertaken by the individual worker or their supervisor following suitable training – to more complicated procedures, such as lung function tests for employees at risk of inhaling harmful substances, carried out by a doctor.

Once all suitable health surveillance tests, questionnaires or examinations have been completed, the results must be interpreted. If there are signs the control measures are not working, steps must be taken as soon as practicable to eliminate or control the exposure to a safe level. Also, if a worker's health has been adversely affected by exposure to hazardous substances it may be necessary to redeploy them to safer work.

Consultation and review

As with any aspect of health and safety, employers should consult and involve their employees when identifying the hazards and risks from hazardous substances and in developing the control measures. This is because workers usually have a good knowledge of the work and can often highlight concerns and suggest suitable risk controls. There is also a specific legal duty on employers to consult their employees on matters affecting their health and safety – see HSE's website for detailed advice.

If the organisation employs five or more people, the significant findings of the COSHH assessment – including the actions that are being taken to control the risks – must be recorded. Even if less than five employees are present, it generally makes sense to record the findings if the risks are significant; it would be difficult to repeat the assessment; or if recording the findings will make it easier to review the control measures in future.

Skin problems

Another health problem that can be caused, or made worse, by work involving hazardous substances is skin damage and disease. The most common work-related skin disease is contact dermatitis, which can occur when the skin comes into contact with something that either causes irritation or causes an allergic reaction. Other common skin problems related to exposure to hazardous substances include:

- **Burns** – due to contact with corrosive

substances, such as strong acids

- **Skin cancer** – for example, due to exposure some to chemicals, such as coal tar products.

Some hazardous substances can also pass through the skin and cause disease elsewhere – such as blood diseases caused by exposure to benzene.

There are two types of dermatitis:

Irritant contact dermatitis

This is caused by contact with substances that dry out and damage the skin, such as detergents, some solvents, oils, wet cement and some hairdressing products (such as some shampoos and hair bleaches). It can also be caused by prolonged or frequent contact with water – particularly in combination with soaps and detergents – known as ‘wet work’.

Dermatitis from wet work is common in industries such as hairdressing, metal machining, catering, cleaning and healthcare – for example, where hairdressers frequently get their hands wet while washing hair; catering staff spend long periods washing up; and healthcare staff have to frequently wash their hands for hygiene purposes.

Allergic contact dermatitis

This occurs when a person develops an allergy to something that comes into contact with their skin, such as chemicals in some hairdressing products (like hair dyes), chemicals in cement, some adhesives, and some plants and foods.

The allergic reaction can appear over hours, days or even months and years,

and once someone has developed an allergy, it is likely to be permanent and any skin contact with the substance involved will trigger the allergic reaction in the skin.

The signs and symptoms of the different types of dermatitis are similar, and the first signs are usually dry, red and itchy skin. Flaking, blistering, cracking, swelling and pain can follow, and the symptoms can be so severe the sufferer is unable to carry on doing the type of work that caused the condition. Most cases of dermatitis occur on the hands and forearms, though other areas can also be affected, such as the face.

Under COSHH, employers are legally required to prevent – or adequately control – employees’ exposure both to substances that can cause skin problems and disease and to substances that can enter the body through the skin and cause health problems elsewhere.

HSE says that, when seeking to prevent ill health from skin exposure to hazardous substances, employers should generally follow the ‘avoid, protect, check’ approach. This means:

- Avoiding direct contact between unprotected skin and hazardous substances, products and wet work if possible
- Protecting the skin
- Checking the skin regularly for the first signs of damage, such as itchy, dry or red skin.

There are many ways of preventing or reducing contact with substances that can damage the skin, such as:

- Eliminating the substance altogether – for example, using a scraper to remove

Working with hazardous substances

- paint instead of paint stripping with a solvent
- Substituting a hazardous substance with a safer alternative – such as changing a powder to a less dusty pellet form to reduce the spread of dust
- Avoiding direct handling of hazardous substances and contaminated work articles – for example, using tools and equipment, such as tongs and scoops, to handle items rather than the hands
- Using dishwashers rather than washing pans, utensils etc. by hand.

However, if it's not possible to totally avoid skin contact with harmful substances or processes, employers should take steps to protect workers' skin, including by providing suitable PPE, such as gloves, aprons and overalls.

Also, since adequate attention to skincare can help to protect the skin, employers should take steps such as:

- Providing adequate washing facilities with hot and cold water
- Providing the mildest and least aggressive skin cleaning cream that will do the job, as cleansers can also damage the skin
- Reminding workers to wash any contamination from their skin promptly
- Providing soft cotton or paper disposable towels for drying the skin
- Reminding workers of the importance of thoroughly drying the skin after washing
- Supplying suitable pre-work creams (these can make it easier to remove dirt during washing, so milder cleansing agents can be used)

- Encouraging workers to protect their skin by frequently applying a moisturiser – this will help to replace the natural oils that help to keep the skin's protective barrier working properly (moisturisers should also ideally be applied each time the hands are washed and dried)
- Reminding workers to apply after-work moisturising creams at the end of a shift.

Employers must also provide suitable health surveillance if there is a risk of employees developing diseases such as dermatitis due to skin exposure to known hazardous agents. The aim is to detect the early signs of harm so action can be taken to prevent any further damage and to treat the condition.

Checks for skin damage and disease could be as simple as a responsible person carrying out regular visual inspections of the potentially exposed areas of workers' skin. HSE says at-risk employees should also be trained and encouraged to regularly check their skin – for example, for the early signs of dermatitis, such as itchy, dry and red skin.

Flammable substances

Employers must also assess and eliminate or control the risk of a fire or explosion from the presence, storage and use of substances like chemicals, gases and certain dusts.

There are many substances that can cause fires and explosions, including certain chemicals, solvents, paints, varnishes, welding gases (such as

acetylene), petrol, fuel oil and liquid petroleum gas in canisters. Dusts from some machining and sanding operations can also form explosive atmospheres that may ignite – for example, if ignition sources such as sparks from electrical equipment are present.

Under the Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres Regulations 2002 (DSEAR), employers must eliminate or reduce the risk of fires, explosions and other similar incidents (such as an uncontrolled chemical reaction), from dangerous substances and potentially explosive atmospheres. They must:

- Identify any dangerous substances used, created (or liable to be created), and the fire and explosion risks they pose
- Put control measures in place to eliminate or adequately control the risks
- Set up controls to reduce the impact of incidents involving dangerous substances
- Prepare plans and procedures for dealing with emergencies
- Provide employees and others, such as contractors, with adequate information, instruction and training on controlling and dealing with the risks
- Identify and classify areas of the workplace where explosive atmospheres may occur, and avoid allowing ignition sources, such as unprotected equipment that could cause sparks, into those areas.

Employers should first attempt to eliminate or reduce the risk from dangerous substances by replacing them

with a safer or less risky substance or process. For example, it may be possible to replace a low ‘flashpoint’ liquid with a non-flammable one, or one with a higher flashpoint.

However, if this is not possible, other control measures should be implemented, in the following order:

- Reduce the quantity of dangerous substances to a minimum
- Avoid or minimise releases of dangerous substances
- Control releases of dangerous substances at source
- Prevent the formation of an explosive atmosphere, including by ventilation
- Collect, contain and remove any releases to a safe place
- Avoid ignition sources
- Keep incompatible substances apart – for example, by keeping sources of ignition, such as naked flames, and substances that can catch fire, such as gas, vapour and dusts, separate.

The asbestos threat

One of the most deadly substances people can be exposed to at work is asbestos. In fact, more than 5,000 people die every year in Britain from diseases such as mesothelioma and lung cancer linked to past exposure to asbestos.

Asbestos can be present in any UK building erected before 2000 and can be found in materials such as ceiling and floor tiles, roof sheets, lagged pipework, boiler flues and sprayed and textured coatings. Asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) are safe if kept in good condition

Working with hazardous substances

but if the material becomes loose, damaged or disturbed, the asbestos fibres will be realised into the air and they can be breathed in by people nearby.

Among those most at risk of exposure are tradespeople working on buildings – such as carpenters, plumbers, computer and data installers, fire and burglar alarm fitters and building surveyors. However, the occupants of a building – such as workers based at the location or residents – can also be put at risk if asbestos fibres are disturbed by others (such as those working on the fabric of the building), or as a result of general wear and tear, or deterioration, of the substance.

Preventing asbestos exposure

Under the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 (CAW), those planning to carry out building, maintenance and similar work in or on premises, plant and equipment that could contain asbestos must assess – and then eliminate or adequately control – the risk of their employees or others being exposed to the substance. This means before starting any work that could disturb ACMs or suspected ACMs, they must:

- Identify whether asbestos is present and determine its type and condition – for example, by asking the building owner for information on the location and type of asbestos in the building and its condition (see ‘duty to manage’ section below)
- If no information is available – or it is limited – and there is reason to suspect asbestos may be present, have the

area surveyed and samples of the material due to be worked on analysed

- Alternatively, assume any material that will need to be disturbed contains asbestos and take the appropriate precautions for the highest risk situation.

The employer or person in charge of any work liable to disturb asbestos or suspected asbestos must also:

- Carry out a risk assessment to see if it is possible to undertake the work while avoiding the risk of asbestos exposure
- If it’s not possible to avoid the risk of exposure identify who might be at risk and the possible level of asbestos exposure from the task
- Decide if the work needs to be carried out by an HSE-licensed asbestos contractor
- Decide on and implement appropriate work methods to ensure exposure is prevented or kept as low as reasonably practicable
- Prepare a plan of work, explaining what the job involves, the work procedures and the controls that will be followed
- Ensure those carrying out the work are provided with the correct equipment, such as asbestos enclosures and respiratory protective equipment
- Ensure the area is inspected at the end of the job to ensure it is fit for re-occupation
- Make arrangements for the safe disposal of any asbestos waste.

Under the Control of Asbestos Regulations, employers must ensure that any employees liable to be exposed to asbestos – and those who supervise

them – are provided with adequate information, instruction and training so they can safeguard themselves and others from the risk of exposure.

The aim is to ensure workers and supervisors understand the health risks posed by exposure to asbestos, are able to recognise ACMs or suspected ACMs, and know what to do if they come across them or are required to work on them so they can protect themselves and others.

There are three levels of information, instruction and training – asbestos awareness, non-licensable work with asbestos and licensable work.

Therefore, employees whose work could foreseeably disturb the fabric of a building – or other items that might contain asbestos – exposing themselves and others to the substance, and people who supervise such work, must be given suitable ‘asbestos awareness’ information, instruction and training.

The aim is to provide workers and supervisors with the information they require to avoid disturbing asbestos and suspected ACMs during their normal work activities. Typical examples of workers who might require awareness training are those in the refurbishment, maintenance and allied trades – such as electricians, telecommunications engineers and building surveyors.

However, as stated, awareness training is only designed to instruct workers on how to *avoid* disturbing asbestos and protect themselves and others from exposure. If the employer *plans* to carry out work that will disturb ACMs, more detailed information and

training must be provided to those who will undertake it.

Duty to manage asbestos

To help prevent people being exposed to asbestos, those in charge of non-domestic premises – such as workplaces and public buildings – where asbestos is present, or is liable to be present, are required under the CAW to assess and manage the risks from ACMs on their site.

The idea is that by identifying and managing ACMs and suspected ACMs, the dutyholder – such as the employer or the building owner – can help to ensure that people working in or visiting the premises are not exposed to asbestos due to the substance being accidentally disturbed or deteriorating.

In essence, the dutyholder must:

- Take reasonable steps to find out if there are ACMs on the premises and, if so, in what amount, where they are located and what condition they are in
- Presume suspect materials contain asbestos unless there is strong evidence to prove otherwise
- Make, and keep up-to-date, a record of the location and condition of all ACMs or materials that are presumed to be ACMs
- Assess the risk of anyone being exposed to asbestos fibres from the materials identified
- Prepare and implement a plan that sets out in detail how the risks from ACMs and suspected ACMs will be managed, including the steps that will be taken to prevent the material being accidentally damaged or worked on

Working with hazardous substances

- Periodically review and monitor the plan – and the arrangements made to implement it – to ensure it remains relevant and up-to-date
- Provide information on the location and condition of ACMs or suspected ACMs to anyone who is liable to work on or disturb them – such as visiting contractors – so they can put in place suitable exposure controls.

As well as applying to all non-domestic premises, the ‘duty to manage’ also applies to the shared areas of certain residential premises, such as the foyer, stairs and plant room of a block of purpose-built flats. See HSE’s website for full guidance on how to meet the duty.

Finally...

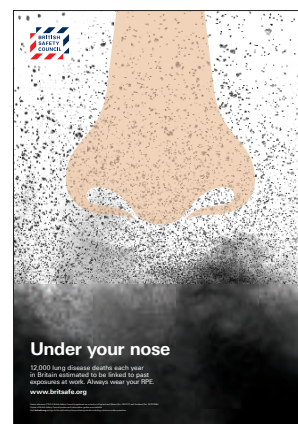
Hazardous substances can pose a serious risk to the health, safety and welfare of people at work – from chemical burns to health conditions such as asthma and dermatitis, and fatal diseases like mesothelioma and lung cancer.

Fortunately, in most cases, steps can be taken to eliminate or control the risk of exposure. For example, employers can implement adequate control measures, such as enclosing work processes and installing ventilation systems, and provide workers with appropriate instruction, training and supervision on how to protect themselves.

If steps such as these are followed, the number of workers who are injured or made ill by exposure to hazardous substances will be greatly reduced – and many lives will be saved.

Get the poster:

Remind workers to avoid exposure to hazardous substances like dusts, chemicals and gases.



British Safety Council members with the Tools and Templates membership module can download these posters from their online account. Log in at:
www.britsafe.org
(UK & international)
www.britsafe.in (India)

Recommended reading

HSE guidance on minimising the risks from Covid
[hse.gov.uk](https://www.hse.gov.uk)

Health and safety made simple/toolbox
[hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety](https://www.hse.gov.uk/simple-health-safety)
[hse.gov.uk/toolbox](https://www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox)

Occupational disease: HSE microsite
bit.ly/2KCLWNS

Lung disease: HSE microsite
[hse.gov.uk/lung-disease/index.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/lung-disease/index.htm)

Working with substances hazardous to health: A brief guide to COSHH
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg136.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg136.pdf)

COSHH Essentials (webtool)
[hse.gov.uk/coshh/essentials/index.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/essentials/index.htm)

Example COSHH risk assessments
[hse.gov.uk/coshh/riskassess/index.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/riskassess/index.htm)

COSHH Approved Code of Practice
[hse.gov.uk/coshh/further/publications.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/further/publications.htm)

Safe handling of chemicals poster
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/chemicals-poster.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/chemicals-poster.htm)

Local exhaust ventilation (LEV): HSE webpages
[hse.gov.uk/lev](https://www.hse.gov.uk/lev)

EH40/2005 Workplace exposure limits
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/eh40.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/eh40.htm)

Construction dust
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/cis36.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/cis36.htm)

Dust control on cut-off saws used for stone or concrete cutting
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/cis54.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/cis54.pdf)
Control of diesel engine exhaust emissions in the workplace
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg187.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg187.htm)

Diesel exhaust in the workplace (TUC guide)
bit.ly/2HI2GYT

Breathe freely. A workers' information card on occupational asthma
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg172.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg172.pdf)

Lead and you: working safely with lead
[hse.gov.uk/lead/resources.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/lead/resources.htm)

Respiratory protective equipment: HSE
bit.ly/2Y08NtB

Is your mask protecting you?
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg460.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg460.htm)

Using disposable respirators: pre-use checks
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/disposable-respirator.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/disposable-respirator.pdf)

Welding fume guidance (HSE)
[hse.gov.uk/welding](https://www.hse.gov.uk/welding)

Preventing contact dermatitis and urticaria
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg233.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg233.htm)

Managing risks from skin exposure at work
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg262.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg262.htm)

Skin checks for dermatitis poster
[hse.gov.uk/skin/posters/skindermatitis.pdf](https://www.hse.gov.uk/skin/posters/skindermatitis.pdf)

Controlling fire and explosion risks in the workplace. A brief guide to DSEAR
[hse.gov.uk/fireandexplosion/dsear.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/fireandexplosion/dsear.htm)

Managing asbestos in buildings. A brief guide
[hse.gov.uk/asbestos/information.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/information.htm)

Asbestos essentials. A task manual for building, maintenance and allied trades of non-licensed asbestos work
[hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg210.htm](https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg210.htm)

Breathe Freely – lung disease guidance (BOHS)
[breathefreely.org.uk](https://www.breathefreely.org.uk)

Occupational health toolkit (IOSH)
bit.ly/2JhSDEq

No Time to Lose (IOSH work cancer campaign)
[notimetolose.org.uk](https://www.notimetolose.org.uk)

Further help

BOHS (British Occupational Hygiene Society)

Professional body for occupational hygienists, who specialise in preventing work-related ill health caused by exposure to hazardous substances and agents, such as chemicals, fumes and dusts. Website contains a directory of consultants who can help employers control exposure to hazardous substances.

bohs.org

Breathe Freely

BOHS (British Occupational Hygiene Society)-led campaign that aims to prevent cases of occupational lung disease in the UK manufacturing and construction industries. Website features free guidance on preventing exposure to hazardous substances like welding fume and dust.

breathefreely.org.uk

British Safety Council

Offers training courses and qualifications for managers and workers on how to protect everyone at work from exposure to hazardous substances.

www.britsafe.org

British Safety Industry Federation (BSIF)

Trade body representing PPE manufacturers and suppliers that strives to ensure high standards in the supply and use of PPE. Runs the 'Clean Air – Take Care!' campaign that aims to raise awareness among RPE users, fit testers and advisors on the selection and use of RPE.

bsif.co.uk
fit2fit.org

Fit2Fit RPE Accredited Fit Test Providers scheme

A scheme from the BSIF designed to confirm the competence of people who offer fit testing for tight-fitting RPE facepieces. Under the voluntary scheme, individuals can be accredited as a competent provider of RPE fit testing if they pass a formal assessment process overseen by Fit2Fit.

fit2fit.org

Health and Safety Executive (HSE)

Responsible for enforcing health and safety law at most industrial workplaces in the UK. Offers a wide range of online guidance on managing a wide variety of health and safety risks.

hse.gov.uk

Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland Enforces health and safety law in Northern Ireland. Also offers guidance for employers.

hseni.gov.uk

Healthy Working Lives (Scotland)

Free health and safety advice service for Scottish employers of all sizes. The service also offers a free online RPE selector tool.

healthyworkinglives.scot
bit.ly/3zIIADm

Healthy Working Wales

Free health and safety advice service for employers and employees in Wales. Website provides a variety of guidance to help employers improve the health, safety and welfare of their employees.

www.healthyworkingwales.wales.nhs.uk/home

IOSH

Chartered body and membership organisation for safety and health professionals. Provides a free online guidance on managing health and safety.

iosh.com

No Time to Lose

IOSH campaign designed to help employers prevent and reduce cases of occupational cancer. Website provides free guidance on preventing and reducing exposure to carcinogenic substances and hazards, such as asbestos, diesel engine exhaust emissions and silica dust.

notimetolose.org.uk

Trades Union Congress (TUC)

Helps trade union safety representatives manage risks to workers' health, safety and welfare.

tuc.org.uk



The first truly joined-up approach to employee health, safety, and wellbeing



Helps you build a healthy, profitable, and sustainable future for your company.

Sign up now:

www.beingwelltogether.org

T +44 (0)208 600 1000

E support@beingwelltogether.org

- Flexible health, safety and wellbeing solutions tailored to your needs
- Unique tools to benchmark your organisation
- Access to industry leading HR, health, safety, and wellbeing tools
- Advice and support from industry experts to help you every step of the way.



Because
Experience
Counts



Members – seize the opportunity **Your exclusive benefits**

Login to your account to access your exclusive support package, including:

- 24/7 advice and support line for help when you need it most
- *Safety Management* magazine to keep you informed with industry news
- Regular e-alerts to keep you up to date on best practice and stay abreast of the latest sector developments
- Sector Interest Groups to connect you with other leads in your field
- Access to new 'back to work' support, including a member discount on our COVID-19 Assurance Assessment service.

Not a member?

Sign up now at:

www.britsafe.org/membershipnow