

Further information

The HSENI produces a variety of useful publications that are available on its website at www.hseni.gov.uk COSHH(NI). Additional information is available on:

CLEAPSS

Website: www.cleapss.org.uk

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The largest teachers' union in Northern Ireland

**Hazardous
Chemicals**

health&safety
at work

The largest teachers' union in Northern Ireland

This leaflet provides essential information on controlling hazardous chemicals in schools and colleges.

The Regulations

The control of substances hazardous to health are covered by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2003 and the Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2003. Detailed guidance is available in the form of the *Dangerous Substances and Explosive Atmospheres – Approved Code of Practice*, which is available from Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) on their website at www.hseni.gov.uk.

The Regulations are designed to protect workers against any substance in the workplace potentially injurious to health.

Harmful substances

Schools and colleges contain many substances that are potentially dangerous. Such substances will be found, for example, in laboratories, craft rooms, art rooms or cleaners' storerooms.

Many of these substances are easily recognisable because they will be labelled: **irritant, corrosive, harmful, toxic, very toxic** and/or **poisonous**.

Some harmful substances may be produced in schools and colleges, e.g. products of chemical experiments.

Some substances are not toxic but are still potentially dangerous and are covered by the Regulations (e.g. dust in quantity).

All who come into contact with such substances are at risk.

Employers' responsibilities

The employer is legally responsible for compliance with the Regulations and is required

to carry out an 'assessment' of all substances that may be hazardous to health in the workplace.

Having identified such substances, the employer should remove them or provide staff with sufficient equipment, instruction and training to enable them to use them without risk.

The employer must carry out a thorough inspection of any control equipment installed (e.g. fume cupboards) at least once every 14 months in order to ensure that it is working effectively.

Visual checks should be made at regular intervals appropriate to the individual circumstances.

Risk assessment

The HSENI advises that risk assessment involves 'working out the chances of any substance causing harm in the actual circumstances of its use or production (i.e. the risk) and then, in the light of that, determining the precautions that are needed'.

The employer must appoint a 'competent person' to undertake risk assessments.

The competent person must be 'competent' by dint of training, experience or aptitude and knowledge of the workplace. The employer is solely responsible for ensuring the competence of those to whom the task has been delegated.

An employer may request assistance from staff in completing the task of conducting a risk assessment, particularly in specialist subject areas.

The NASUWT does not believe that the responsibility for conducting risk assessments should form any part of a teacher's job description. Members who are asked to do more than assist in the process should seek advice from the NASUWT.

'General' risk assessments

'General' risk assessments may be used provided they are applicable to the actual circumstances of the school or college.

For example, some local authorities and schools use '**Hazcards**' as general assessments for substances and experiments used in school science.

'Hazcards' are produced by the Consortium of Local Education Authorities for the Provision of Science Services (CLEAPSS). A subscription is required to access these.

Employees' responsibilities

It is the responsibility of employees to comply with the employer's instructions when using (or causing to be used) hazardous substances.

Employees should check when using or making a substance that they are doing so in the recommended manner.

The NASUWT supports all measures intended to improve the health and safety of its members at work. The NASUWT Representative should be consulted by those undertaking assessments. Any worries or concerns members have regarding the operation of the COSHH Regulations should be reported to the NASUWT.

Advice and support

Where an NASUWT member suffers any injury they should telephone the NASUWT free Legal Advice Line 0808 100 2221.

For additional advice and support, contact your NASUWT Local Association or Northern Ireland Centre.

Contact details can be found:

- on the NASUWT website at www.nasuwat.org.uk;
- in the NASUWT diary; or
- by phoning 028 9078 4480.