Use MSDSs to keep yourself safe

MSDS stands for "Material Safety Data Sheet". Material safety data sheets are a key document in the handling of hazardous substances. They follow a recognised format to set out:

- The ingredients of the product;
- The health effects of the hazardous substance and first-aid instructions;
- Precautions to follow when you use the product; and
- Safe handling and storage information.

You can use an MSDS to:

- Find out how to use hazardous substances correctly and safely;
- Understand safety recommendations and the reasons for these recommendations;
- Be aware of the consequences of failure to follow these recommendations;
- Know how to respond in emergency situations; and
- Recognise symptoms of overexposure.

Where to find out more

The *Approved Code of Practice for the Management of Substances Hazardous to Health* sets out an approach to managing hazardous substances to meet the requirements of the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992.

The code, and more specific information on hazardous substances, is available from the Occupational Safety and Health Service. You will find your nearest office listed in the *Blue Pages* at the front of your telephone directory.

Published by the Occupational Safety and Health Service
of the Department of Labour
November 1997
OSH 3573 HCO

Working Safely with Hazardous Substances

— Advice for employees

We use **chemicals** in our jobs every day, and in all sorts of ways. Some are harmless, some are hazardous, and some we might not be too sure about.

Sometimes we are not even aware that we are using chemicals in our jobs. At other times we might not be as sure as we should about how we use them.

That's where the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 comes into it. The Act places a duty on your employer to ensure your work is safe. Regarding chemicals and other hazardous substances, your employer must ensure that, while at work, you are not exposed to hazards arising out of the use of hazardous substances.

For your part, if you work with chemicals, you **need** to know how you can protect yourself and others in your workplace from any harmful effects.

Substances hazardous to health

"Chemicals" as a word is not quite broad enough to describe the range of substances with the potential to harm us. That's why we talk instead about ***substances hazardous to health.***

A substance hazardous to health is any substance, or product containing a substance, to be used or produced in a workplace that is known or suspected to cause harm to health.

What you need to know

When you are working with any hazardous substance, you need to know:

- **What** you are dealing with and any risks arising from it. Remember: ***Read the label***;
- **How to protect yourself** from harm while using it; and
- **Whether or not you need regular medical checks** if you work with certain substances and are at risk of coming in contact with them (exposure).

What you need to do

When working with a hazardous substance you need to:

- Use only work practices that will protect your own and others' health and safety;
- Follow instructions and guidelines regarding the use of substances hazardous to health at work;
- Draw the attention of your employer to any hazard or issue arising from the use of a substance hazardous to health that you have become aware of;
- Use personal protective equipment in the manner in which you have been trained, wherever it has been provided by your employer;
- Participate in monitoring programmes; and
- Not wilfully misuse anything provided by your employer to ensure your own or others' health and safety.

What you can expect your employer to do

Your employer is required by law to:

- Provide information — in a form that you are able to understand — about hazardous substances handled and used in the place of work;
- Ensure that you are adequately trained or supervised to use hazardous substances safely, and to use and maintain any protective clothing and equipment provided;
- Provide ready access to the MSDS and ensure that you have a clear understanding of safe handling requirements;
- Ensure there are procedures for dealing with emergencies arising with the use of substances hazardous to health, and that employees are involved in the development of these procedures;
- Ensure that all containers of substances hazardous to health used or handled in a place of work are labelled to allow the substances to be used safely;
- Ensure that a suitable and sufficient assessment is made of any work involving potential exposure to any substances hazardous to health;
- Take all practicable steps to prevent or adequately control exposure of employees to substances hazardous to health;
- Monitor your exposure to substances hazardous to health; and
- With your informed consent, monitor your health in relation to any exposure to a substance hazardous to health.