

Control of substances hazardous to health

Guidance

Control of substances hazardous to health

Youth work organisations will regularly use, provide and come into contact with substances which could be 'hazardous to health' and should therefore be aware of the potential risks. Many everyday household items including cleaning products, fuels and paints have the potential to cause harm if used incorrectly or if adequate controls are not in place. Many items, when used for their intended purpose and when held in small volumes will not require complex controls to adequately protect workers and young people from harm. However, youth work organisations should assess risk in accordance with regulations.

Most youth programmes will not involve contact with hazardous substances but they should be aware of potential risks and how these are managed in workplaces. Any youth programme or project which is, for example, planning to include the use of paints and/or other solvents or substances such as white spirit and other cleaning agents, should ensure that such substances are controlled in accordance with COSHH Regulations.

COSHH Regulations

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) regulations 2002 states the responsibilities of employers in the control of hazardous substances. The regulations cover: chemicals; fumes; vapours; dusts; germs that cause diseases; gases and biological agents. The Health & Safety Executive provides a brief guide to COSHH, and also a step by step guide to help assess COSHH risk.

COSHH regulations state principles of good control practice as:

- Minimise the release and spread of emissions
- Consider the possible routes of exposure, including ingestion, inhalation and/or skin contact
- Control measures should be chosen which are proportionate, and effective
- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) should be used where appropriate
- The effectiveness of controls should be regularly monitored and reviewed
- Staff and workers should receive adequate information and training
- New measures, new risks: ensure applied controls do not produce new risks

Warning symbols

Substances hazardous to health are required to carry safety warning symbols to indicate the type of hazard presented by the substance. Workers should understand the appropriate safety precautions to keep themselves and others safe. Substances often have multiple hazard warnings when the risks are in different categories.

Symbol	Hazard	Example products
	Toxic / Very toxic May cause serious health risk or death if inhaled, ingested or it penetrates the skin.	Anti-freeze, drain cleaner, pesticides
	Corrosive In case of contact may cause burns or destruction of living tissue.	Bleach, household cleaning products e.g. limescale remover, disinfectants, acids, ammonia
	Health hazard May cause damage to health if inhaled, ingested or it penetrates the skin.	Hand sanitiser, white spirit, methylated spirit, washing detergent, toilet cleaner, insect repellent, paint
	Serious health hazard May cause long-term threats to health or death if inhaled, ingested or it penetrates the skin	White spirit, petrol, turpentine
	Explosive May explode when dry or under the effects of flame or heat	Fireworks, camping gas N.B. aerosols such as deodorants may well explode if heated but are unlikely to carry this symbol
	Oxidising Reacts with other substances and may cause explosive damage or damage to living tissue.	Hydrogen peroxide (used in hair bleach), swimming pool chemicals, sodium nitrate used for curing meats, garden fertilisers
	Highly Flammable May catch fire on contact with air. Flashpoint below 0 degrees celsius. Extremely Flammable Liquid with a flashpoint of below 0 degrees celsius and boiling point below 35 degrees celsius.	Hand sanitiser, WD40, white spirit, methylated spirit, camping gas, petrol, deodorants, cosmetics such as nail polish remover
	Gases under pressure Gases which may explode when heated or refrigerated gases which may cause cryogenic injuries.	Camping gas, spray paint
	Dangerous to the environment Substances presenting an immediate or delayed danger to the environment.	Bleach, white spirit,

Assessing the level of risk

The use of any potentially hazardous material should be covered by a risk assessment with appropriate controls applied. Any product displaying the warning symbols shown above should be used with care, for the intended purpose only and as per the manufacturer's guidance.

In assessing risk, youth work organisations should be mindful of any substances that:

- carry a warning symbol
- produce dust or vapour which could be inhaled
- state that they should be kept away from children

In most cases, substances held in small quantities, such as cleaning products or hand sanitiser will present a low risk, as long as measures are in place to ensure the substance is used for its intended purpose. When working with young people, organisations should take into account the needs of the group and ensure adequate supervision is in place to prevent any misuse or increased exposure, for example from ingestion.

Higher volumes of substances, such as industrial/commercial quantities of cleaning products will require additional controls, particularly regarding safe storage and should be kept in lockable cupboards to prevent young people having unsupervised access.

Often, when supplied in large quantities common substances such as paints or bleach will be regarded as 'dangerous to supply', at which point, the supplier by law must provide a Safety Data Sheet which includes guidance on safe use, storage and handling.

A [step by step guide to help assess COSHH risk](#) is provided by the Health & Safety Executive.

Applying control measures

Following the principles of [risk assessments](#), youth work organisations should identify suitable and proportionate controls to mitigate the risk from hazardous substances. The hierarchy of controls should be applied as detailed in the risk assessment document, with the aim being to eliminate the risk from the substance by not using it. Where it is not possible to avoid its use altogether, other controls should be applied with PPE being the 'last line of defense'.

- Eliminate
- Substitute
- Isolate
- Process and procedure
- PPE

COSHH and residential accommodation

The use of residential accommodation venues may present a higher risk of COSHH substances as residential experiences can often include instances of reduced supervision, and may afford young people unsupervised access to spaces such as cleaning cupboards or storerooms if mistakenly left unlocked.

On arrival at and during use of residential accommodation facilities, youth workers should be mindful of potentially hazardous substances that may be present at the venue, within buildings or being used on site.

Workers should ensure cleaning substances are kept locked away, and pay attention to the presence of dusts, fumes, vapours, gases and liquids and should seek advice if they are unsure. If concerned, workers should liaise with venue/site staff to identify substances, evaluate any associated risk and employ appropriate controls where possible in line with guidance provided by the Health & Safety Executive.

If not satisfied with controls available or if a potential immediate risk to young people remains after controls have been applied, workers should make plans to move away from the site as soon as is reasonably practicable and safe to do so.

Naturally occurring hazards

Whilst not always high risk, in some youth work programmes, consideration should also be given to risks from substances without a warning symbol, such as natural materials. For example, wood/saw dust, or dust from stone can cause asthma, and flowers, bulbs or fruit/vegetables can cause skin irritations and/or dermatitis. Workers should be mindful of conditions or allergies which may increase risk and impact a young person's suitability to undertake a particular task or partake in a specific activity, and should ensure that this information is gathered in advance.