

The Importance of Health and Safety in the Kitchen Environment –

COSHH – Control your Substances

In a previous edition, we considered occupational dermatitis, which can be caused or exacerbated in the kitchen environment by contact with chemical agents used in commonplace kitchen products. In this edition, we will look at managing the risks associated with hazardous substances on a broader basis.

This is an important issue to be aware of, as employers have a duty under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (“**COSHH**”) to prevent or reduce exposure to hazardous substances by carrying out a risk assessment in relation to any potentially hazardous substances, putting in place control measures, providing appropriate information and training and carrying out health surveillance where appropriate.

Risks

The hazardous nature of some substances, such as bleach, will be fairly obvious and denoted by a clear hazard warning label. However, for some substances this will be less obvious. For example, employees working in a dusty environment are at greater risk of developing lung disease, and many cleaning products which are routinely used in the kitchen environment (such as washing up liquid, soap and surface cleaners) have the potential to cause occupational dermatitis, as explored in our earlier edition.

If these risks are not properly managed, then in addition to potentially attracting unwanted attention from the regulator, care providers are likely to experience higher levels of staff absence and be at increased risk of civil claims. It is therefore important that when carrying out a **COSHH** risk assessment for the kitchen environment, care providers do not inadvertently narrow the scope of the assessment to only the more obviously hazardous substances.

Managing risks

The HSE provides a case study which highlights the importance of this point. In this case, a cook developed serious breathing difficulties and severe asthma as a result of working with flour in a small kitchen with poor ventilation. The particular issue was that, despite repeated complaints, there were no controls in place to minimise the flour dust created by a large dough maker. The cook took early retirement on health grounds and was awarded **£200,000** in damages from her employer following a compensation claim.

We set out below some key areas for care providers to consider when looking at hazardous substances in the kitchen environment:

1. **Consider** areas where there is potential for hazardous exposure around the workplace.
 - This includes anywhere skin is in contact with liquids or pastes, as well as any process that emits dusts, fumes or gas.
 - Within the kitchen examples of substances hazardous to health include: flour dust, spices, citrus oils and concentrates, as well as cleaning and disinfectant products.
2. **Assess** how substances in certain areas are harmful to health, for example:
 - Flour dust can cause asthma (flour exposure must be kept as far below WEL of $10\text{mg}/\text{M}^3$ as reasonably practicable).
 - Continuous hand immersion throughout a day can cause dermatitis.
 - Cleaning products may cause irritation of hands and eyes.
3. **Think about** how you can reduce the risk of harm occurring.
 - Work carefully to avoid the spread of dust.
 - Keep the workplace well ventilated, fit hoods or canopies over working appliances.
 - Ensure all staff are trained how to use and store products safely.
 - Rinse equipment such as gloves, mops and cloths after use and store them in a clean place.
 - Make sure any chemicals are locked away in specified chemical cupboards which are clearly marked.
4. **Take steps** to reduce risks.
 - Remind staff to wash and dry their hands thoroughly after washing them.
 - Ask staff to check for dry, red or itchy skin on their hands.
 - Remind staff to clean up effectively after spills and practice this if necessary.
5. **Review** which tasks might lead to exposure.
 - Evaluate how tasks are likely to harm workers' health.
 - What control measures are already used and what more could be done to prevent the risk.
 - Review the Accident Book for specific areas of concerns.
6. **Record** your findings
 - If you have five or more employees you are required to record the significant findings of an assessment.
 - A record should be made as soon as possible after an assessment.
7. **Review** your assessment
 - Assessments must be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure hazards are effectively controlled.

- Assessments must be reviewed immediately if the original assessment is no longer effective or if working circumstances change significantly.

It is important that staff understand any measures which have been put in place to ensure they do not inadvertently put themselves at risk. If a thorough risk assessment is carried out, followed by ongoing review and monitoring of the effectiveness of any control measures put in place, care providers will be in a strong position to ensure that the risks posed by any substances hazardous to health are consistently and effectively managed.

In the next and final edition of this series, we will consider fire safety in the kitchen environment.

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