CHEMICALS IN THE OFFICE

THE HAZARD COMMUNICATION STANDARD

Hazardous chemicals in the office are regulated under the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) hazard communication standard, which is intended to help control chemical exposure on the job. The regulation is also referred to as 'hazcom' or the 'Right-to-Know Law.' The term *hazard communication* refers to the intent of the regulation to enforce *communication* of chemical *hazards*.

You may be wondering what type of hazard communication would have to take place in the office. On the surface, it may appear that there are no chemicals to be concerned about in an office environment. Think again. Although chemicals certainly aren't as prevalent in offices as they are in some production facilities, they still do exist.

The hazard communication standard says you have a right to know what hazardous chemicals you may be exposed to by working with or around them. The standard is intended to make your office safer. So it's important that you are aware of the standard and what you should know about chemicals.

The hazcom standard requires that all chemicals to which you may be exposed in your office be fully evaluated for possible physical or health hazards. And, it mandates that all information relating to identified hazards be made available to affected individuals.

This chapter examines in more detail:

- Common Office Chemicals
- Who & What The Standard Covers?
- Chemical Labeling
- Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS/SDSs)

COMMON OFFICE CHEMICALS

Companies often underestimate the number and types of hazards represented by office chemicals. Although typically there is no production process in the office environment, there are many chemicals used to keep almost any office running smoothly.

Think of the cleaning supplies used to clean up the place, sometimes used by cleaning and maintenance staff, but occasionally or routinely used by office workers themselves.

Then there are the copiers and printers, using toner and ink, some of which almost certainly fall into the hazardous category. Art or design departments, as well as other specialized office work areas, probably use a variety of special inks, paints, adhesives, and other compounds that are hazardous.

And then there are the daily exposures many of us have to such things as:

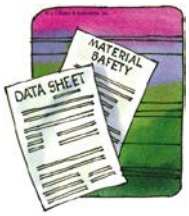
- paper correction fluids;
- white board cleaner; and
- markers used on white boards and flip-charts.

The types of chemicals suggested here may or may not be hazardous, depending on the brand your department uses and the chemical compounds that make it up. Completely safe inks, toners, and even cleaning supplies have been developed and are available. But usually they are more expensive, and they may not provide an exact substitute for the original product (i.e., a natural, non-toxic cleaning product may not work as effectively as good old toxic bleach).

In any case, you can determine whether a chemical may be hazardous by reading the label and/or MSDS/SDS, according to the information given further in this chapter.

Who and What Does the Standard Cover?

The hazard communication standard covers any employee who may be exposed to hazardous chemicals in the workplace. You need to know what hazardous chemicals you work with or around and how to protect yourself. You and your co-workers will learn about any such chemicals and how to take precautions against potentially negative effects associated with them through training and written materials.



If the material safety data sheets (MSDS/SDSs) section provided in this chapter doesn't answer all your questions, ask the safety manager, office manager, or other person responsible for safety in your office about anything you might have questions on when looking at MSDS/SDSs or the written program.

The standard applies only to those chemicals which, after exposure, pose either a physical hazard, i.e., one such as flammability, combustibility, or explosivity, or a health hazard, i.e., causing acute or chronic health effects such as skin irritation, respiratory difficulty, or even something as serious as cancer. As pointed out previously, not all office chemicals are hazardous.

The hazard communication standard doesn't apply to hazardous waste/substances regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency, biological hazards, tobacco products, many wood or wood products, or food, cosmetics, consumer products (when used as consumer products), or certain drugs.

THE MATERIAL SAFETY DATA SHEET

A material safety data sheet (MSDS/SDS) is a fact sheet for a chemical which poses a physical or health hazard in the workplace. MSDS/SDSs must be in English; use them to find the following chemical information that they must list:

- Identity of the chemical (as used on the label).
- Physical and chemical characteristics (e.g., vapor pressure, flash point).
- Physical hazards.
- Health hazards.
- Primary routes of entry.
- PELs, TLVs, or other exposure limit used or recommended by MSDS/SDS preparer.
- Whether it is a carcinogen.
- Precautions for safe handling and use.
- Control measures (e.g., engineering controls, work practices).
- Emergency and first-aid procedures.
- Date of preparation of latest revision.
- Name, address, and telephone number of manufacturer, importer, or other responsible party.

Your Department must have an MSDS/SDS for each hazardous chemical it uses. A copy of each must be kept where you can use it during the work day.

If relevant information in one of the categories was unavailable at the time of preparation, the MSDS/SDS must indicate that no information was found. Blank spaces are not permitted. If you find a blank space on an MSDS/SDS, contact your safety manager, office manager, or other person responsible for safety in your office.

LABELS AND LABELING REQUIREMENTS

Containers of hazardous chemicals must be labeled in English. A container is whatever the chemical is stored in or is in when you use it. Chemical containers may include:

- spray bottles;
- aerosol or non-aerosol cans;
- cartridges (as for toner);
- small bottles (as for correction fluid).

Information on labels may also be presented in other languages for non-English speaking employees, but English is required. Labels must contain the following information:

- Identity of the hazardous chemical.
- Appropriate hazard warnings.
- Name and address of the chemical manufacturer, importer, or other responsible party.

Now you are aware of chemicals in your office that might be hazardous, and you know how to read the labels and MSDS/SDS's for information regarding those hazards. Use this knowledge to identify hazardous chemicals, what their hazards are, and how to avoid the ill effects of those hazards.

Take any precautions suggested by the label or MSDS/SDS. And if you have any questions, ask your supervisor, safety manager, or another person responsible for safety in your office.