Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH)

# What is COSHH?

COSHH (The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (as amended) are regulations that apply to all work with substances that can cause harm to health. It includes all chemicals (except those that are only flammable and explosive) and also biological agents such as bacteria and viruses.

# What are the key points?

The key things you need to be aware of from COSHH are:

* When working with hazardous substances, you must carry out a risk assessment
* When working with hazardous substances, you must control people’s exposure
* If you use LEV (such as a fume cupboard) it must have a thorough examination at least every 14 months. (as well as a visual inspection whenever it is used)

# Risk assessments?

These will be covered in more detail elsewhere but briefly.

* A risk assessment must be carried out by a competent person before any work is done with hazardous substances.
* It is the employer’s responsibility to make sure these are done, though they can arrange for them to be carried out by others.
* Risk assessments under COSHH can be combined with assessment of other risks in a single risk-assessment document.

# Control Measures

Control measures are the procedures, techniques and equipment you use to reduce any exposure of people to hazardous substances to as low a level as possible.

COSHH sets the various different methods in a hierarchy of preference. You should try to deal with the risk using each level of the hierarchy in turn, working downwards.

# Hierarchy of Control Measures

* **Eliminate** - elimination of the hazardous substance; i.e use a different chemical altogether
* **Modify** - modification of the substance, process and/or workplace; There is little option for modifying workplaces in school but the substance could be modified by using, for instance, a lower concentration and the process could be altered by, for instance carrying out a reaction at room temperature rather than boiling or working at a smaller scale.
* **Process** - applying controls to the process, such as LEV; in a school context, this means the use of a fume cupboard.
* **Minimise** - working in ways that minimise exposure, there are not too many of these relevant in a school but things such as not raising dust, is one.
* **PPE** - equipment or devices worn by exposed individuals. eg: eye protection (of various types) or gloves.

**Note – PPE is the last choice**, only to be used once you have reduced the risk as far as possible by other means but it is still not low enough

# Workplace Exposure Limits (WELs)

(Not strictly in COSHH but very relevant – set out in EH40)

Workplace exposure limits are the concentration limits of airborne contaminants (fumes, aerosols and dusts) that are permitted in the workplace, given in parts per million (ppm) or mg/m3. There are two types (though sometimes EH40 only gives 1 of these)

Short Term Exposure Limit (STEL) – Concentration averaged over 15 minutes

Long Term Exposure Limits (LTEL) – Concentration averaged over 8 hours

It is the duty of employers to reduce the level of these contaminants, not just to the WEL but as far below as is feasible. The phrase is As Low As Reasonably Practicable (ALAIRP)