COSHH Explained: What It Means, Why It Matters, And How To Comply

If you use, make, or are exposed to any kind of hazardous substance at work, COSHH applies to you. In the UK, COSHH stands for the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health. It is the legal framework that requires employers to control exposure to harmful substances to prevent ill health. Getting COSHH right protects people, cuts incidents, and supports a compliant, productive business.

What does COSHH mean?

COSHH is a set of Regulations made under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. In plain terms, it requires you to assess the risks from hazardous substances, prevent or control exposure, ensure controls work, provide information and training, and prepare for emergencies. The duty sits with employers, but employees must follow training and use controls as instructed.

Why is COSHH important?

- It prevents work related diseases such as asthma, dermatitis, COPD, and infections.
- It reduces accidents from mishandling chemicals, dusts, fumes, or biological agents.
- It is a legal requirement, so compliance helps you avoid enforcement action and claims.
- It improves productivity by reducing sickness absence and rework, and by building a strong safety culture.

In short, the purpose of compliance in the workplace is to meet legal duties, protect people, and manage risk so operations can run smoothly. An example of compliance is carrying out a COSHH risk assessment for a new cleaning product, then introducing safer decanting procedures, gloves, eye protection, and clear training before anyone uses it.

What does COSHH cover?

COSHH is not only about bottles with hazard symbols. It covers any substance that can cause harm if exposure is not controlled, including:

- Chemicals and preparations, for example cleaning agents, solvents, adhesives, paints, inks, fuels.
- Fumes, such as welding fume and solder fume.
- Dusts, including wood dust, flour dust, silica dust, and general respirable dusts.
- Mists and vapours from spraying, mixing, or heating substances.
- Biological agents, for example bacteria, viruses, moulds, and bodily fluids.
- Nanomaterials and some generated by products, like diesel exhaust.

A helpful way to remember the main categories often seen in workplaces is to think of five common groups: chemicals, fumes, dusts, mists and vapours, and biological agents. These groups account for most routine COSHH exposures across offices, workshops, warehouses, construction, food production, and care settings.

Who does COSHH apply to?

- Employers and self employed people who create or use hazardous substances.
- Employees who may be exposed in the course of their work.
- Contractors and agency workers on your site.
- Specific sectors such as construction, manufacturing, food handling, healthcare, laboratories, education, facilities management, and offices where cleaning products and printer toners are used.

Note, COSHH does not cover asbestos, lead, or radioactive materials, which have their own regulations. However, day to day controls and training principles are similar.

The 8 steps of COSHH in practice

HSE guidance sets out a practical cycle you can apply. Here is a simple, UK focused interpretation for small and medium workplaces:

1. Identify substances and exposure tasks

- List all substances used, created, or released by work, including by products and biological agents.
- Note who is exposed, how, and for how long.

2. Assess the risks

- Use Safety Data Sheets, HSE Workplace Exposure Limits, and task knowledge.
- Consider inhalation, skin contact, ingestion, and injection risks.

3. Decide on control measures

- Eliminate or substitute with a less hazardous option where possible.
- Use engineering controls, for example enclosures, local exhaust ventilation.
- Apply safe systems of work, for example closed transfer, decanting in ventilated areas.
- Provide PPE as a last line of defence and ensure it fits the user.

4. Implement controls

- Put procedures in place, label containers, and segregate incompatible substances.
- Provide suitable storage, spill kits, and disposal arrangements.

5. Ensure controls work

- Check and maintain engineering controls, including LEV testing at least every 14 months where required.
- Inspect PPE, replace when needed, and keep records.

6. Training and information

- Give clear instructions on hazards, controls, emergency actions, and first aid.
- Verify understanding with short briefings or online courses.

7. Health surveillance where appropriate

- Introduce checks for conditions like dermatitis or asthma when risk indicates.
- Act on results and review controls.

8. Review and update

- Reassess after incidents, changes in substances or processes, or at planned intervals.
- Update your COSHH inventory and assessments.

Everyday examples you might be missing

- Office: Printer toner dust, cleaning sprays, DSE sanitising wipes, and ozone from some equipment.
- Workshops: Welding fume, cutting oils and mists, brake cleaner, epoxy resins, hardwood dust.
- Construction: Cement and concrete dust, silica from cutting, bitumen fumes, PU foams.
- Food production: Flour dust, disinfectants and sanitisers, quats, enzyme powders.
- Care and education: Bodily fluids, disinfectants, medicines handling, moulds.

These exposures are manageable with good controls and simple training.

A mini guide to implementing COSHH in SMEs

- Create a one page inventory. Capture product names, hazards, tasks, and who uses them.
- Tackle high risk tasks first. Focus on fine dusts, welding fume, isocyanates, and corrosives.
- Substitute smartly. Choose water based products and pre diluted packs to avoid decanting.
- Control the process. Fit or improve extraction, enclose mixing, and use lids and closed systems.
- Standardise simple procedures. For example, decant below eye height, use funnels, and clean with wet methods rather than dry sweeping.
- Select PPE that actually fits. Face fit test RPE where required and maintain it properly.
- Label and store. Keep incompatible substances apart, use secondary containment for liquids, and label decanted containers clearly.
- Plan for spills and first aid. Keep SDS accessible, place spill kits and eyewash where work happens, and practice the response.
- Keep records lean. Save assessments, LEV tests, training certificates, and health surveillance records in one shared folder.
- Refresh training annually or when processes change. Short, targeted online modules keep knowledge current.

How online training supports COSHH compliance

Targeted eLearning makes it easier to meet the duty to inform, instruct, and train. You can brief new starters quickly, refresh knowledge on demand, and evidence completion for audits. If you are building a training matrix, consider core modules that sit alongside your assessments and procedures:

- COSHH awareness training for everyone who uses or may be exposed to hazardous substances, including supervisors and buyers who select products.
- Risk assessment training online to help managers and leads complete proportionate COSHH assessments.
- Display screen equipment training for office based teams who use cleaning products, printer toners, and disinfectants in the workspace.

Online Safety Training provides interactive, video led courses with instant certificates that slot neatly into SME compliance programmes. If you are planning your next round of refresher training, you can explore:

- coshh awareness training
- risk assessment course online
- display screen equipment training

Each course is UK specific and supports practical implementation without disrupting operations.

Quick answers to common COSHH questions

- What does the term COSHH mean? Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations, the UK rules for managing harmful substances at work.
- What are the 5 main substances covered by COSHH? Typical groups are chemicals, fumes, dusts, mists and vapours, and biological agents.
- What is an example of compliance? Completing a COSHH assessment for a new disinfectant, substituting a less hazardous product, installing local extraction for decanting, issuing nitrile gloves and eye protection, and training the team before use.

Summary

COSHH is about controlling real world exposures so people do not get ill at work. It applies widely, from offices and workshops to construction, food production, and care. When you follow the 8 step cycle, you reduce incidents, meet the law, and improve productivity. Pair simple, practical controls with clear, role based training. If you want ready to use modules to support your plan, take a look at coshh awareness training, risk assessment course online, and display screen equipment training. These courses help you demonstrate that people are informed, controls are understood, and your business is audit ready.