



Keeping People Safe

CHURCH HEALTH & SAFETY TOOLKIT

HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES



Occasionally, some products or substances you may come across at your church or church hall can potentially be hazardous to health. Usually, this is where they can be inhaled; come into contact with eyes or skin; or mistakenly swallowed by children. Here, the adverse effects are immediately noticeable. Typical substances could include those used for cleaning (e.g. bleach, drain unblocker and limescale remover); gardening (e.g. weed killers, insecticides and fertilisers); or for fuel (e.g. petrol, diesel and oil).

Sometimes, the damaging effects of some hazardous substances may not be apparent for many years. Usually, by that time it is too late to do anything about it. These substances can be less obvious, but include dusts, fumes, asbestos or lead. Some substances generated by animals and birds can also be harmful to health, such as large quantities of pigeon droppings. Even discarded needles can harbour blood-borne diseases such as HIV or hepatitis, and can be a problem for some churches.

Having said this, whilst some substances can be harmful, where they are used properly they almost never are.

Legal requirements

Generally, if someone is injured you may need to show that you have met your duty of care. You will have to ensure that any substances you provide for use by others are safe.

If you are an employer you must comply with the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations as well.

Broadly, these require employers to:

- Complete, record and revise (where necessary) a specific risk assessment to identify what precautions are needed
- Take action to eliminate hazardous substances altogether where this is possible
- Implement suitable precautions where exposure to hazardous substances cannot be eliminated
- Make sure that these precautions are taken and are properly maintained, with some needing to be examined and tested at specified intervals
- Provide information and training to any employees and volunteers (in these circumstances) on what they need to do.

Preventing danger from some hazardous substances is covered under other specific health and safety regulations. A good example of this is asbestos under the Control of Asbestos Regulations. We have prepared further information on this which is available at www.ecclesiastical.com/healthandsafety



Hazards to look out for

- Chemicals or other substances stored and used for maintenance, cleaning and repair, including paints and glue
- Substances labelled with hazard symbols such as toxic, very toxic, harmful, corrosive or irritant
- Chemicals that have been stored for a long time and are not used, which may have decomposed or leaked
- Unidentifiable chemicals or those that have been put into other containers
- Large quantities of stored hazardous substances
- Hazardous substances that are not stored securely, where vulnerable groups such as children may be able to reach them, or where vandals and trespassers could easily find them
- Evidence of spills indicating problems with dispensing substances safely (e.g. petrol)
- Large quantities of bird droppings in places such as towers
- Use of fuels in enclosed spaces where fumes may not disperse readily if ventilation is poor
- Discarded needles and related drug paraphernalia around the church or grounds
- Tasks creating substantial quantities of dust*.

*Note: this list is not exhaustive

Precautions you can take

Typical precautions include:

- Using a safer product or substance instead of a more harmful one
- Only storing minimum quantities of the products or substances
- Storing substances securely, including bleach and toilet cleaners often left by toilets
- Storing flammable substances correctly in a flame-retardant cabinet or container, well away from ignition sources
- Disposing of chemicals no longer in use, or that you cannot identify safely. When disposing of hazardous substances, you may have to meet a number of legal obligations which if not adhered to can result in a fine. You can obtain more information on how to do this properly from your local Council
- Ensuring only proprietary diesel and petrol containers are used with locking caps and spouts
- When handling fuels, doing this in well ventilated areas with open windows and doors wherever possible
- Using bird roosting deterrents, such as bird spikes and porcupine wire to prevent larger birds roosting
- Providing personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves etc.*

*Note: this list is not exhaustive

Making a start

Action

1. Identify what hazardous substances are present at your church or church hall.

Make an inventory or note of those you have identified.

2. Check the precautions you have taken are adequate. If they are not, identify any additional ones that are needed.

Make a note of the precautions in place and/or any additional ones that might be required.

Also, note who will be responsible for taking them.

Guidance

You can use the hazard list on the previous page to help you identify these. However, it is not exhaustive and there may be other substances you will need to consider depending on your own particular circumstances.

You should remember to include:

- All the areas where you may store substances including toilets, kitchens, store rooms and plant or boiler rooms
- Areas around or in the church or church hall where dangerous waste may accumulate
- Any tasks that might generate dust, fume or vapour.

If you are an employer, you will need to complete general risk assessments. These should help you identify where hazardous substances are encountered.

If you are an employer, you will need to complete specific risk assessments relating to hazardous substances (sometimes referred to as COSHH assessments). These should help you identify if your existing precautions are adequate.

If you need to complete COSHH assessments, further information is provided by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) available at

www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/basics/assessment.htm

In completing these, you may need to:

- Gather information about the substances, the work and working practices. This could include the product data sheets provided by suppliers
- Evaluate the risks to health
- Decide what to do in terms of: controlling or preventing exposure; emergency planning; monitoring exposure; health surveillance; information, instruction and training etc.
- Record and review your assessments.

More detailed guidance is provided in the publication 'A step by step guide to COSHH assessment' available at: **www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/hsg97.htm**

Making a start

Action

3. Ensure that the precautions you have identified are taken and remain effective.

4. Ensure that employees (and volunteers in these circumstances) know what precautions to take when using hazardous substances.

Make a note of any information or training that is provided to individuals in these situations.

Guidance

For many smaller churches using 'domestic' products, simply following the safety instructions provided by the manufacturer or supplier together with some simple ongoing checks should be enough. This may involve checking that personal protective equipment (PPE) is available and in good condition or that hazardous materials are properly stored, for example.

For larger churches or those where there are many, varied substances or tasks creating dust, fumes etc., more extensive precautions may be required. These could include additional equipment (for example, ventilation to extract dust) or checks to ensure that employees are following a safe way of working.

Further information is available at: www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/

In these situations, you may need to make a note of any checks or inspections you make to ensure these precautions are being taken or equipment remains safe.

You should correct any defects identified in good time.

The level of information and training required will vary depending on the nature of the work and your particular circumstances. If you have completed COSHH assessments, these will help you determine what is necessary.

For many smaller churches, tasks involving hazardous substances are usually low-risk. Here, making sure any employees and volunteers receive simple instruction on how to use any substance safely would be sufficient. This could simply be to follow any safety instructions provided with a particular product.

For larger churches or those where there are many, varied substances or tasks, you may have to do more. This may involve formal training or information relating to the use of safety equipment (including personal protective equipment); the completion of user checks; procedures for cleaning up spills etc.

Making a start

Action

5. Document your arrangements and responsibilities for using hazardous substances safely.
Review these where necessary, particularly if you suspect that they are no longer valid.
Keep the notes you have made in the steps above.

Guidance

If you have prepared a health and safety policy, record your arrangements as part of it.

You can use our Church Health and Safety Policy template if you haven't done this and need one to comply with health and safety law.

You may also need to keep simple records of the checks you have made and actions you have taken for certain periods of time. Further information is available at: www.hse.gov.uk/coshh/

Want to know more?

We have produced other useful resources to help you get started or simply check the adequacy of what you have already done. All are available at www.ecclesiastical.com/healthandsafety

Further guidance and resources are also available at: www.hse.gov.uk/cosHH/

Note: if you are in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Jersey, Guernsey or the Isle of Man, then regional variations might apply. In this instance, you should check the guidance provided by the Enforcing Agency for your region. This will be freely available on their website.

Need to contact us?

If you would like to speak to someone about health and safety in churches you can either:

Call our Risk Management Advice Line on 0345 600 7531
(Monday to Friday, 09.00 to 17.00 - excluding Bank Holidays)

Or email us at risk.advice@ecclesiastical.com

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