



HAZARDS

Hazardous Chemicals

Also covering hazardous substances and dangerous goods

Many of the chemicals regularly stored and used in Australian workplaces are classified as hazardous. Hazardous chemicals can cause serious injury and illness as well as property and environmental damage. The handling, storage and use of these substances is controlled by specific legislation, regulations and codes.

Prior to the implementation of the *Model Work Health and Safety Act* (WHS Act)* most states regulated hazardous chemicals, hazardous substances and dangerous goods separately. Under the Model WHS Act they are all regulated under a single framework for hazardous chemicals using a hazard classification and hazard communication system based on the United Nations' *Globally Harmonised System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals* (GHS).

Hazardous chemicals categorised as skin irritants, carcinogens or respiratory sensitisers pose health hazards through direct contact or exposure, usually through inhalation, skin contact or ingestion. Flammable, corrosive, explosive, reactive or oxidising chemicals pose a chemical and physiological hazard, becoming dangerous when they are handled or used inappropriately rather than through contact or exposure.

A Person Conducting a Business or Undertaking (PCBU) is legally required to manage the risks associated with the use, handling and storage of chemicals in their workplace. PCBU is the term used in the WHS Act to describe an individual or organisation operating some kind of business or undertaking. In a Church environment this could include a diocese, a school, or a religious order.



WHS regulations include specific duties for a PCBU including:

- ◆ Following correct procedures for the labelling of chemicals.
- ◆ Maintaining a register and manifest.
- ◆ Obtaining current Safety Data Sheets (SDSs) from the manufacturer, importer or supplier of a chemical. SDSs provide information on the identity, ingredients, potential health effects, toxicology properties, physical hazards, safe use, handling and storage, emergency procedures and disposal requirements specific to each chemical.
- ◆ Ensuring exposure standards are not exceeded.
- ◆ Providing health monitoring and training for workers.
- ◆ Ensuring the provision and availability of fire protection as well as fire fighting, emergency and safety equipment, amongst others.

* **Please note:** In Victoria, 'Work Health and Safety (WHS)' is referred to as 'Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) pursuant to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004* and in Western Australia, 'Work Health and Safety (WHS)' is referred to as Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) pursuant to the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984*.

The use, storage or handling of certain chemicals is prohibited or restricted in certain situations under the WHS Act.

In order to meet this obligation it is vital that a PCBU has robust policies in place, provides adequate training and takes all the necessary steps to respond to and investigate complaints.

When might this hazard apply?

Volunteers handle garden maintenance in most small organisations. If chemicals such as fuel for lawn mowers, fertilisers and herbicides are not correctly labelled and stored they can present a risk to workers' health and safety as well as property. The use of recycled containers such as plastic drink bottles for storing fuel for example would be considered extremely unsafe. Metal containers are suitable, providing they are good quality, well sealed and correctly labelled. Plastic containers made for the purpose of fuel storage and compliant with Australian standards are also safe to use.

Powerful, industrial cleaners are often used in aged care facilities. These substances pose serious risk to the health and safety of workers, who may sustain injuries from direct exposure through skin contact or inhalation. Ventilation is extremely important when using these products, especially when cleaning small or confined spaces, the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) should be compulsory in applicable situations and adequate training and supervision must be provided. Where possible an alternate, less hazardous substance should be sourced.

What do I need to do?

- ◆ Review the requirements in your state or territory in relation to hazardous chemicals.
- ◆ Identify the risks associated with hazardous chemicals in your workplace. Ask yourself these questions:
 - What might happen?
 - When might it happen?
 - Why might it happen?
 - What could cause this to happen? (there may be multiple causes)
 - What has happened in the past?
- ◆ Consider what you are currently doing to manage the risk associated with hazardous chemicals (and also known as controls).
- ◆ Consult with workers, volunteers and Health and Safety Representatives (HSRs) to develop policies and procedures around the storage and use of hazardous chemicals, investigations, complaints and grievances.
- ◆ Conduct a hazardous chemicals awareness session for all workers, including contractors and volunteers.
- ◆ Develop and implement any new controls necessary.

Legislation and Guidelines

See your state and territory work health and safety authority website for specific requirements.

Practical Help

Safe Work Australia

www.safeworkaustralia.org.au

If you would like further information about hazardous chemicals please contact the *risksupport* Helpdesk on:

1300 660 827
helpdesk@risksupport.org.au

Catholic Church Insurance Limited
ABN 76 000 005 210, AFSL no. 235415
GPO Box 180 Melbourne 3001

Important Notice: This publication is intended to provide a summary and general information only to clients of Catholic Church Insurance Limited. It does not constitute, and should not be relied on as advice or considered as a comprehensive coverage of the topics discussed. You should seek professional advice tailored to your own circumstances.