

Cancer at Work

Cancer Hazards

Cancer causing substances (carcinogens) pose a hazard which is quantitatively different from that of other toxic substances.

1. There is no known safe level of exposure.
2. There can be a long latent period between exposure and contracting the disease.
3. Cancer effects are usually irreversible and often fatal.

GPMU Response

The only sensible trade union response in light of these difficulties is to adopt a policy of prevention, to remove the agents which cause cancer, instead of waiting for workers to die, years after exposure. To do this we need a method for deciding which substances we regard as causing cancer and a subsequent strategy for dealing with them.

Classifying Carcinogens

Throughout Europe there is an agreed system for classifying and labelling carcinogens. Under this, cancer causing substances are divided into three categories:-

Category One - Substances known to be carcinogenic to humans

Category Two - Substances which should be regarded as if they are carcinogenic to humans

Category Three - Substances which cause concern for humans owing to possible carcinogenic effects but, in respect of which, available information is not adequate for making a satisfactory assessment.

Hazard warning symbols and specific risk phrases are applied to substances and preparations in the three categories as follows:-

Categories One and Two - "Toxic" symbol and R45 "may cause cancer" or R49 "may cause cancer by inhalation".

Category Three - "Harmful" symbol and R40 "possible risk of irreversible effects"

Appendix 7 to EH40 lists the substances which have been assigned risk phrases R45 (May cause cancer) and R49 (May cause cancer by inhalation) in the current "Approved supply list", and the substances, preparations and processes given in Schedule 8 of the COSHH Regulations. It is from these lists, and the list of Category 3 carcinogens, that the GPMU has produced a list of chemicals with carcinogenic potential, which may arise in the Printing, Packaging and Paper Industries.

Suppliers health and safety data sheets should identify any Cat.1, 2 or 3 carcinogens contained in a product.

GPMU Cancer Policy

It is recommended that the attached list of known or suspected carcinogens is presented by Chapels to their employers. In addition, Chapels should make the following request:-

1. The employer provides a written assurance that none of these substances, or any classified as Cat.1, Cat.2 or Cat.3 carcinogens, are used at the employer's undertaking.
2. Where these substances are in use, the employer will take all possible steps to eliminate the substance in question.
3. Where the employer can display that the elimination is not feasible, the exposure of all workers to that chemical will be reduced to the lowest technical possible level.
4. Where no chemicals on the list are in use at the undertaking, the employer should sign a written agreement that none of those chemicals will be subsequently introduced.
5. The employer will agree to eliminate, or if that can be shown to be impossible, control to the lowest possible levels, any of the chemicals that are subsequently added to the list of Cat.1, 2 or 3 carcinogens.

GPMU Cancer List

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Acrylonitrile (Cat 2)
4-Aminodiphenyl (Cat 2)
Arsenic and its organic compounds (Cat 1)
Asbestos (all forms) (Cat 1)
Benzene (Cat 1)
Benzidene (Cat 1)
Cadmium and Cadmium compounds (Cats 2 & 3)
Carbon tetrachloride (Tetrachloromethane) (Cat 3)
Chloroform (Cat 3)
1,4 - Dioxane (Cat 3)
Epichlorhydrin (Cat 2)
Formaldehyde (Cat 3)
Hydrazine Hydrate (Cat 2)
Hydrazine Sulphate (Cat 2)
Methylene Chloride (Dichloromethane) (Cat 3)
Mineral oils, which are: (Cat 2)
(i) unrefined and mildly refined vacuum distillates
(ii) catalytically cracked petroleum oils with final boiling points above 320 degrees Centigrade
Nickel (Cat 3)
2-Nitropropane (Cat 2)
Perchloroethylene (Tetrachloroethylene) (Cat 3)
Rubber process dust and rubber fume (Cat 1)
Trichloroethylene (Cat 3)

NB. This is not an exhaustive list, and only gives examples of some chemicals that might be encountered in the paper, packaging and printing industry. All chemicals that are classed as Category 1, 2 or 3 carcinogens are candidates for the GPMU cancer policy.