

# Unite Guidance on 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.

## Unite 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.

According to HSE research the largest contributors to cancer deaths in the UK were asbestos, followed by mineral oils, solar radiation, silica, diesel engine exhausts. Large numbers of workers are potentially exposed to more than one carcinogenic agent, in particular in the construction workers, but also in manufacturing, transport, painting, welding and textiles.

## Classifying Carcinogens

### IARC

The most widely internationally accepted list of cancer-causing substances is produced by The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC).

This list contains all hazards evaluated to date, according to the type of hazard posed and to the type of exposure. There are several groupings. Unite believes that all substances in Group 1, Group 2a and Group 2b should be removed from the workplace or, if that is not possible, exposure should be fully controlled. Currently the IARC lists over 400 entries in Groups 1, 2a and 2b.

Group 1: The agent is *carcinogenic to humans*.

Group 2A: The agent is *probably carcinogenic to humans*.

Group 2B: The agent is *possibly carcinogenic to humans*.

Group 3: The agent is *not classifiable as to its carcinogenicity to humans*.

Group 4: The agent is *probably not carcinogenic to humans*.

## Work that might involve cancer risks (Sep 2008)

### IARC Group 1: Exposure circumstances

- Aluminium production
- Arsenic in drinking-water
- Auramine production
- Boot and shoe manufacture and repair
- Chimney sweeping
- Coal gasification
- Coal-tar distillation
- Coke production
- Furniture and cabinet making
- Haematite mining
- Involuntary smoking (exposure to secondhand or 'environmental' tobacco smoke)
- Iron and steel founding
- Isopropyl alcohol manufacture (strong-acid process)
- Magenta production
- Painter (occupational exposure as a)
- Paving and roofing with coal-tar pitch
- Rubber industry
- Strong-inorganic-acid mists containing sulfuric acid (occupational exposure to)
- Tobacco smoking and tobacco smoke

### IARC Group 2a: Exposure circumstances

- Art glass, glass containers and pressed ware (manufacture of)
- Carbon electrode manufacture
- Cobalt metal with tungsten carbide
- Hairdresser or barber (occupational exposure as a)
- Petroleum refining (occupational exposures in)
- Shiftwork that involves circadian disruption
- Sunlamps and sunbeds (use of)

### IARC Group 2b: Exposure circumstances

- Carpentry and joinery
- Cobalt metal without tungsten carbide
- Dry cleaning (occupational exposures in)
- Firefighter (occupational exposure as a)
- Printing processes (occupational exposures in)
- Talc-based body powder (perineal use of)
- Textile manufacturing industry (work in)

## European Union

Throughout Europe there is a similar 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"

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

### **Unite Cancer Policy**

It is recommended that safety representatives approach their employers seeking a commitment to remove exposure to all known or suspected carcinogens. In particular, they should make the following requests:-

1. The employer provides a written assurance that no substances classified as IARC Group 1, Group 2a or Group 2b carcinogens, are used at the employer's undertaking. At the very least this written assurance should apply to all products that are labelled with R45 or R49, or identified as carcinogens or possible carcinogens on suppliers' health and safety data sheets.
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 Group 1, Group 2a or Group 2b.

The list can be found at: <http://monographs.iarc.fr/ENG/Classification/index.php>