Understanding Safety Data Sheets

What’s at Stake?

Working with hazardous chemicals is a known cause of illness or injury to workers. A Safety Data Sheet (SDS) must be provided by the supplier for any substance classified as hazardous. An SDS contains a lot of vital, specific information on how to store, handle, and work with that substance. The information is essential for all staff working with a hazardous chemical as it gives more detail than the chemical’s label.

The SDS for each chemical must be easily available to workers at all times and can either be a paper copy or electronic copy, provided staff can access it when needed, such as on their cell phone or laptop.

What’s the Danger?

A Safety Data Sheet is written for everyone who works with the substance. This means a lot of the information can be quite technical or not relevant to all workers. This can lead workers to think the SDS does not apply to them or it’s too technical to read, so they don’t read it. Safety Data Sheets are designed to be easy to read, with 16 standardized sections. And since many sections apply to most workers, failure to read the SDS is risky and can lead to illness and injury. Employers have a responsibility to train workers on how to read an SDS and how to work safely with chemicals.

Hazards

- Lost or out of date SDS
- Workers do not know what risks and precautions they need to take
- Complex information leads to misunderstanding

How to Protect Yourself

3 easy ways to use Safety Data Sheets

1. Know the SDS

- Know where the SDSs are kept and how to get to them.

    - How to access electronic version.
    - Where the paper file is kept.
- Make sure your supervisor talks you through relevant SDSs when you start work or first start using a hazardous substance.
- Check the chemical label.
    - This gives you a heads up there is more you need to know.
- Attend training updates on working with specific hazardous substances.

2. Read with a purpose

- There are 4 main types of information on each SDS.
    - Identification
        - Of the product and supplier.
    - Hazards
        - Physical e.g. fire, and to health, e.g. breathing difficulties.
    - Prevention
        - How to work safely, reduce or prevent exposure.
    - Response
        - Appropriate responses in various situations (e.g., first aid, fire, accidental release).

3. Important details for everyone

- Check the name of the chemical (Section 1).
- Know what it is typically used for, and when it should not be used (Section 1).
- Know the potential hazards (Section 2).
- Read safe handling and storage instructions (Section 7).
- Know what to do in an emergency (Sections 4, 5 and 6).
- Date of latest SDS revision (Section 16).

Final Word

It is vital you have as much information as possible about chemicals you are working with. Your employer must make sure employees are aware of the specific information they need and can easily get that information when needed. Regular training and updates on the chemicals used and stored at the worksite, complement the information provided in an SDS.