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Health and safety in cleaning operations

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Many cleaning operations involve the use of chemicals and equipment. Managers must ensure that cleaning staff are appropriately trained and that they are familiar with the risks associated with the performance of cleaning tasks in their specific work locations. Risks should be controlled so that cleaners, and any other users of buildings, are kept safe and free from danger of injury.

Cleaning risk assessments

Health and safety risk assessments are a legal requirement. They should be completed at the planning stage of any cleaning project or job, along with suitable work statements. The risk assessment should aim to identify any risks or hazards that might be involved in the job. Control measures or safe systems of work should then be put in place to reduce or remove unacceptable risks.

The level of detail in a risk assessment should be proportionate to the risk. Many minor hazards identified in a risk assessment will be relatively easily addressed but an assessment of significant hazards, such as those posed by heavy cleaning machinery, will need to be much more detailed.

Contractors

Contractors must be provided with comprehensive information on the risks that they may be exposed to while working on the premises, and the measures they need to take to ensure their health and safety and the safety of all others using the building.

Protection from hazardous substances

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 are intended to protect individuals from potentially hazardous substances that they may use or come into contact with at work. Cleaning staff should understand that cleaning chemicals may be harmful and can enter the body through:

- Ingestion, i.e. drinking and eating

- Inhalation of gases, sprays, vapours and dust
- Absorption through the skin.

Staff must be trained to:

- Read container labels, noting any hazards, as it is essential that they understand the mixing of certain chemicals is a potentially dangerous practice
- Use chemicals for their intended purpose only, following safe application procedures
- Use PPE when handling chemicals, e.g. gloves, masks, goggles and overalls
- Store chemicals in accordance with manufacturers' recommendations.

Information on the harmful effects of chemicals and the precautions that need to be observed when they are used, stored or transported are detailed in safety data sheets, which suppliers must provide. Safety data sheets should be available to provide details on:

- The proper use of a substance
- Health risks and fire hazards
- How to use, transport and store the substance
- Emergency action and first-aid advice
- Other information, such as waste disposal.

Wherever cleaning chemicals are being used, other users of the building should be excluded from the area while cleaning is in progress. Cleaning chemicals, cleaning products and potentially dangerous equipment should only be used by appropriately trained individuals under supervision. Cleaning materials, equipment and chemicals should never be left unattended and should be locked away securely after use in dedicated, locked storage areas.

Chemical products most commonly used within the cleaning industry include the following.

- Irritants, such as many multi-purpose cleaners. Although non-corrosive, prolonged contact with the skin should be avoided.
- Harmful substances, such as seal strippers, may involve limited health risks if inhaled or ingested. Contact with the skin should be avoided and PPE, e.g. gloves, goggles and facemasks, should be worn.
- Corrosive substances, such as acid de-scalers can destroy living tissue on contact. Contact with the skin must be avoided and PPE worn.
- Toxic substances, such as white disinfectant, may result in acute health risks or death if inhaled, ingested or if it penetrates the skin. Contact with the skin must be avoided, PPE worn, and exhaust ventilation or breathing apparatus used to prevent exposure to dust or vapours.

Personal protective equipment

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) may include uniforms, safety shoes and equipment, such as [gloves and goggles](#). Managers must ensure that adequate PPE is issued to staff, that those staff are trained in its use and are reminded of their responsibilities, including:

- That PPE should only be used at work
- The responsibility to use PPE properly
- The regular inspection of PPE.

Safe working practices

Managers must ensure that staff are trained in the use of equipment, e.g. stepladders and powered equipment, such as buffers and floor scrubbers. Staff must be encouraged to adopt safe working practices, e.g.:

- To use equipment only if they have been trained or instructed in its use
- To lift supplies and equipment properly
- To follow manufacturers' or suppliers' usage guidelines
- Not to tamper with equipment if it is defective
- Not to block fire exits or staircases with equipment or waste
- Not to leave trailing electrical leads on floors
- To use safety warning signs, e.g. to warn individuals about slippery surfaces.

Slips, trips and falls

Floor cleaning can create a significant risk of [slip and trip accidents](#), both to cleaning staff and to other users of buildings. For example, smooth floors left damp by a mop are likely to be very slippery until they dry out and trailing wires from a vacuum or buffing machine can present a trip hazard.

Staff must remember that warning signs or access prevention should be used even in the case of spot cleaning after spillages. Just because a damp patch is small does not mean that it does not present a slip danger. Cleaning staff should be urged to only wear appropriate footwear to work. All footwear should have an effective grip and should be in good condition, especially when worn in areas such as kitchens and in dining areas where there may be an additional risk of spillages.

Use of containers

Managers may be responsible for the purchase of cleaning materials. Such materials are often supplied in large containers and thereafter decanted into smaller containers for ease-of-use and so dilution systems can be used. If cleaning agents are decanted, managers must ensure that:

- It is safe to do so
- Containers are labelled appropriately
- Chemicals are not placed in unlabelled containers
- Nothing from an unlabelled container is used.

Use of powered equipment

Staff must be trained to check and carefully maintain electrical equipment including:

- A visual check to identify obvious damage to the equipment prior to use
- Checking plugs and cables are in good condition, and removing any defective equipment from use
- Ensuring power cables are long enough to reach the workplace
- Ensuring power cables are not strained
- Ensuring adherence to manufacturers' instructions, e.g. when replacing vacuum cleaner bags, scrubbing rings and buffer pads
- Ensuring power leads are replaced in equipment storage facilities
- Ensuring equipment is cleaned after use.