



Media Release

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New Regulations on Carcinogens and Mutagens at Work

Work-related cancer is one of the biggest problems facing workplaces in the world, accounting for more than half of all work-related deaths in developed countries.

Reducing exposure to carcinogens and mutagens effectively contributes to the prevention of cancer cases, as well as other significant non-cancer health problems caused by these substances. This in turn would lead to an improvement in the quality of life and well-being of workers and their families, prolong working lives as well as contribute to better productivity and competitiveness.

With this in mind and whilst ensuring that the Maltese legislative framework is continuously updated to better reflect technological changes, and in due consideration of the latest available scientific research, the Occupational Health and Safety Authority would like to inform that the regulations pertaining to the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to carcinogens or mutagens at work (Legal Notice 122 of 2003) have been revised and updated.

One of the fundamental principles of occupational health and safety is that risks to the safety and health of workers must be eliminated, or, if this is not possible, reduced to a minimum. To this end, employers must identify and assess risks to workers associated with exposure to specific carcinogens and mutagens at the workplace. Moreover, they must prevent exposure where risks occur and substitute the hazardous process or chemical with and non-hazardous or less-hazardous ones when this is technically possible.

In cases where such substitution is not possible, chemical carcinogens must, as far as it is technically possible, be manufactured and used in a closed system to prevent workers' exposure. Where this is not possible either, worker exposure must be reduced to as low a level as is technically possible.

Whilst taking all this into account, the new regulation sets out new Occupational Exposure

Limit Values (OELVs) for a number of carcinogens and revises OELVs for two carcinogens. It also accounts for the possibility of penetration through the skin for certain substances, in order to ensure the best possible level of protection. The main aim is thus to further improve the protection of workers against the health risks arising from exposure to carcinogens or mutagens at the place of work with a consequential reduction in potential new cases of occupational cancer in the affected workers in the forthcoming years.

In particular, hardwood dusts and chromium (VI) compounds which are carcinogens have lower OELVs (2 and 0.005 mg/m³) respectively. These affect a number of industries namely the woodworking industry, furniture manufacturing and construction in the case of hardwood dusts as well as the production and use of chromium-containing pigments, paints and metal (conversion) coatings in the case of chromium (VI) compounds.

Other carcinogens introduced include refractory ceramic fibres (0.3f/ml), respirable crystalline silica dust (0.1 mg/m³), benzene (3.25 mg/m³), vinyl chloride monomer (2.6 mg/m³ and 1ppm), ethylene oxide (1.8 mg/m³ and 1ppm), 1,2-epoxypropane (2.4 mg/m³ and 1ppm), 2-nitropropane (18 mg/m³ and 5ppm), 1,3-butadiene (2.2 mg/m³ and 1ppm) and bromoethylene (4.4 mg/m³ and 1ppm).

In the case of 5 substances, there is now the introduction of provisions to cater for absorption through the skin. These are benzene (3.25 mg/m³ and 1ppm) which is used in the manufacturing of tire/rubber, chemical and plastic products) and ethylene oxide (1.8 mg/m³ and 1ppm) which is used in the manufacture of food products, textiles, chemicals, chemical products, medical, precision and optical instruments, watches and clocks, hospital and industrial sterilization, R&D, public administration and defence, education, health and social work.

Another two substances which are of particular interest in the manufacture of chemicals, chemical products and man-made fibres, manufacture of rubber products, education, research and development, other business activities, health and social work, public administration and defence are o-Toluidine (0.5 mg/m³ and 0.1ppm, absorption through the skin) and acrylamide (0.1 mg/m³, absorption through the skin).

Absorption of the carcinogen hydrazine through the skin (0.013 mg/m³ and 0.01ppm) will affect chemical blowing agents, agricultural pesticides and water treatment.

OHSA would like to recommend all employers, workers and self-employed to have a look at these regulations and ensure that the legal provisions are being followed.

The legal notice (318 of 2019) may be viewed online at:

<http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=29853&l=1>

For further information one may contact OHSA on 21247677, by email: ohsa@gov.mt or through our Facebook: OHSA Malta. One may also download the free mobile app BSafe@Work

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Notes:

1. An OEL addresses the inhalation route of exposure, describing a maximum airborne concentration level for a given chemical agent above which workers should not be exposed. OELVs are established in relation to a reference period of 8 hours time-weighted average (long-term exposure limit values).