



# THE SCOTTISH OFFICE

Department of Health

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13th January 1998  
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Dear Colleague

## CHEMICAL HAZARD ALERT NOTICE - GLUTARALDEHYDE

### Summary

1. New information was recently issued by the Health and Safety Executive on the health effects associated with exposure to glutaraldehyde at work. A copy of the relevant Safety Hazard Alert Notice is attached. The notice also gives advice on good practice, which employers, users and suppliers may find helpful in considering what they need to do.

### Action

2. Previous advice may not necessarily have reached all staff who might come into contact with glutaraldehyde. General Managers, Health Boards and Chief Executives, NHS Trusts and other addressees are therefore requested to bring this notice to the attention of all appropriate staff within their area of responsibility. It is suggested that this should include:- Control of Infection Officers, Occupational Health Officers, Safety Officers, GPs, Estates Departments, Nursing Managers, Endoscopy, Registered Nursing Homes, Sterilisation and Disinfection, Pharmacy and Supplies Departments.

3. Addressees should note the Health and Safety Commission's Advisory Committees on Toxic Substances recommendation that a Maximum Exposure Limit (MEL) should be set. This places a duty on the employer to reduce exposure to as low a level as is reasonably practicable, and in any case below the Maximum Exposure Limit.

PAUL WILSON  
Director of Trusts

### Addressees

For action:  
General Managers,  
Health Boards

Chief Executives,  
NHS Trusts

For information:  
General Manager,  
Common Services Agency

General Manager,  
State Hospitals Board for  
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Executive Director,  
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### Enquiries to:

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## CHEMICAL HAZARD ALERT NOTICE

### GLUTARALDEHYDE

*This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. The guidance provides information on the health effects associated with exposure to glutaraldehyde at work. It also gives advice on good practice, which employers, users and suppliers may find helpful in considering what they need to do.*

#### **Why issue a chemical hazard alert notice?**

Glutaraldehyde currently has an Occupational Exposure Standard (OES) of 0.2 ppm (or 0.83 mg.m<sup>-3</sup>), expressed as a 15-minute reference period. This limit was established some years ago, and since then glutaraldehyde has been reviewed by an independent committee of experts in occupational health<sup>1</sup>. Because of the information available on the health effects of glutaraldehyde, the committee could not identify a safe level of exposure where it could be certain that there would be no risk of serious health effects.

Because no safe exposure limit for glutaraldehyde could be identified, the Health and Safety Commission's Advisory Committee on Toxic Substances (ACTS) has recommended that a Maximum Exposure Limit (MEL) of 0.05 ppm, expressed as an 8-hour time weighted average and 0.05 ppm, expressed as a 15-minute reference period should be set. A MEL places a duty on the employer to reduce exposure to as low as is reasonably practicable, and in any case below the MEL. Because it takes some time to consult and formally set MELs, this guidance provides interim advice and information to suppliers, employers and users as follows.

**What is glutaraldehyde?** - Glutaraldehyde is usually supplied as an aqueous solution. The vapour has a characteristic pungent odour.

**Where is it used?** - It is primarily used as a biocide and chemical disinfectant, having applications in the health care, offshore, paper-making and agricultural sectors. The main biocide uses include applications as a cold sterilant of medical and surgical instruments and for inhibition of corrosion-causing bacteria in offshore operations. It is also used as a fixative in X-ray film processing and leather tanning and as a preservative in detergents and cosmetics.

**What are the key health hazards?** - The principal concern is that of occupational asthma. This can be a serious condition, and the symptoms in affected individuals include chest tightness and difficulty in breathing. In addition, glutaraldehyde vapour produces irritation of the eyes, nose and throat. Glutaraldehyde is also a skin sensitiser and may produce allergic dermatitis.

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<sup>1</sup> Health and Safety Commission's Working Group on Assessment of Toxic Chemicals

**How does it get into the body?** - Glutaraldehyde is absorbed into the body if the vapour is breathed in, or if the liquid is swallowed. In addition, the vapour and liquid are readily absorbed through the skin. It is therefore important to avoid skin contact with glutaraldehyde.

### What should suppliers do?

- ◆ You should ensure that the information contained in this notice is conveyed to your customers.
- ◆ You must keep your safety data sheets up to date and revise them if any significant new information becomes available as required by the Chemicals (Hazard Information and Packaging for Supply) Regulations 1994.

### What should employers do?

- ◆ You should give priority to preventing your employees being exposed to glutaraldehyde by any route (i.e. inhalation, ingestion, absorption through skin or contact with the skin), as required by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 1994.
- ◆ Where preventing exposure to glutaraldehyde is not reasonably practicable, then you should adequately control exposure by a combination of engineering and process control measures (e.g. by using a different process or substance). **HSE recommends that, although the legal obligation is to reduce exposure to the OES while it remains in force, it would be prudent for you to control exposure to as low a level as is reasonably practicable below the OES. The number of people exposed and the duration of their exposure should be minimised.**
- ◆ You must give all your employees who are, or who may be exposed to glutaraldehyde, sufficient information, instruction and training to understand the potential problems and the precautions they need to take.

**What should employees do?** - You must co-operate with your employer in using the control measures provided and reporting any defects found in the control measures.

**Further information** is contained in the Glutaraldehyde Criteria Document EH 65/32, ISBN 0 7176 1443 3 and the next issue of EH64 (available from HSE Books) HSE free leaflet *Glutaraldehyde and You* is under preparation and will be available in autumn 1998.

**Further help:** Contact HSE's Infoline: Tel 0541 545500