

What is the Globally Harmonized System?

The Globally Harmonized System for Classification and Labeling (GHS) is a way of communicating chemical hazard information consistently using standardized labels and data sheets. It is a new labeling and information system which upgrades OSHA's Hazard Communication Standard in the United States and similar information systems in countries around the world.

Why do we need the GHS?

Different countries have different systems for designing chemical labels and data sheets. Some labeling systems may conflict with others. Before the GHS, there was no international standard for chemical classification. A hazardous substance could be classified as a carcinogen or a reproductive hazard in one country but not another. This was particularly problematic when chemicals were shipped internationally because labels and data sheets were not consistent. Workers around the world got conflicting or misleading information, and sometimes got no information at all.

Who created the GHS?

A number of international groups worked on the GHS, including representatives from government, industry, labor (including the USW) and the United Nations. The effort began in 1992, and there are still periodic meetings to discuss additional hazard classifications.

Is the GHS used in both the United States and Canada?

In 2012, OSHA revised its Hazard Communication Standard (1910.1200) to require the use of the GHS. This change was widely supported by both labor and industry. Many other countries have adopted the GHS, and Canada plans to switch over by December 1, 2018.

What are the major changes to OSHA's Hazard Communication Standard?

The old standard allowed chemical manufacturers and importers to convey hazard information on labels and safety data sheets in any format they chose. The revised standard provides a single set of criteria for classifying chemicals according to their health and physical hazards, and specifies hazard communication symbols that should be used on labels and safety data sheets.

The major changes fall into the following four categories:

1. Hazard classification - Chemical manufacturers and importers are still required to determine the hazards of the products they produce or import. Under the GHS, hazard classification determinations are made using specific, standardized criteria.
2. Labels - Chemical manufacturers and importers are now required to provide a label that includes a signal word, pictogram, hazard statement and precautionary statement for each hazard class and category.
3. Safety Data Sheets (SDS) - These replace Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) and now have a required format with 16 specific sections to ensure consistency in presenting information.
4. Information and training - The GHS requires workers to be trained in the new label elements and SDS format, in addition to the current Hazard Communication Standard training requirements. If you would like help getting your workplace up to date with the required training, please contact the USW's Health, Safety and Environment Department or the Tony Mazzocchi Center at safety@usw.org.

When did the GHS go into effect?

There was a transition period between the old and new Hazard Communication Standards. Some key dates were:

By December 1, 2013	All employers must train workers on the new label format and SDS elements.
By June 1, 2015	Chemical manufacturers and employers must comply with all provisions of the revised standard.
By June 1, 2016	Employers must update workplace labeling and hazard communication programs and provide additional worker training for new health or physical hazards.

How do workers benefit from the revised GHS-compliant Hazard Communication Standard?

The revised standard contains all of the protections of the original standard. The information on labels and SDS is now more accurate, uniform and easy to understand. The format for labels and data sheets is standardized. Hazard warnings no longer contain incomprehensible scientific or legal language. Labels and SDS now contain pictograms - symbols showing particular hazards.

Who can answer questions about GHS?

The USW Health, Safety and Environment Department can answer any questions you may have, and can also provide Hazard Communication and GHS training.