

# The Globally Harmonized System

## What is the Globally Harmonized System?

The Globally Harmonized System for Classification and Labeling, or GHS for short, is an internationally agreed system used in many countries for determining the hazards of a chemical, and to warn users of the chemicals about those hazards through labels and data sheets. In other words, it is a new label and information system which upgrades OSHA's Hazard Communication Standard in the United States and similar information systems in countries that adopt it.

## Why do we need the GHS?

Different countries have different systems for chemical labels and data sheets. The problem is that parts of the systems conflict with each other. In addition, before the GHS different countries did not agree on the requirements for classifying chemicals as, for example, a carcinogen or a reproductive hazard. So a chemical could be listed as a reproductive hazard in one country and not in another.

This is particularly problematic when chemicals are shipped from one country to another because labels and data sheets from one country can't necessarily be used in another. Workers around the world get conflicting, misleading, or no information.

## Who created the GHS?

A number of international groups worked on the classification system for health and environmental hazards and on hazard communication. Representatives from government, industry, labor (including the USW) and international bodies participated. The effort began in 1992, and there are still periodic meetings to discuss adding hazard classifications and making other changes.

## Do we use the GHS in the United States and Canada?

In 2012 OSHA revised its Hazard Communication Standard to adopt the workplace provisions of the GHS. The overall changes were widely supported by both labor and industry. Many other countries have adopted GHS. So far, however, Canada has not.

## What are the major changes to the Hazard Communication Standard?

The old standard allowed chemical manufacturers and importers to convey hazard information on labels and material 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 elements for communicating hazards through labels and safety data sheets.

There are four major changes:

1. **Hazard classification** - Chemical manufacturers and importers are still required to determine the hazards they produce or import. Under the revision, health and physical hazard classification determinations are now made using standard specific 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 will replace material safety data sheets (MSDS) and now have a format with 16 specific sections to ensure consistency in presenting important hazard and protection information.
4. **Information and training** - The revision requires workers to be trained by December 1, 2013 on the new label elements and safety data sheet format, in addition to the current Hazard Communication Standard training requirements. If you would like help in your workplace with the required training, please contact the USW's HSE Department or Tony Mazzocchi Center at [safety@usw.org](mailto:safety@usw.org).

### When does GHS go into effect?

There is a transition period between the old and new Hazard Communication Standard. Some key dates to remember are:

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 will 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 safety data sheets will be much more honest, uniform, and easy to understand. There will be a standard format for labels and data sheets. The hazard warnings will be standardized with no more incomprehensible scientific or legal language. For the first time, labels and data sheets will contain pictograms - symbols showing the hazard.

### Who can answer questions about GHS?

The USW Health, Safety & Environment Department can answer questions or provide Hazard Communication and GHS training.