
Glyphosate
Advice for workplace representatives
May 2015

Glyphosate

Glyphosate is used in a large number of weedkillers. It is the most commonly used weedkiller in the world with about two-third of herbicide sales. It is sold by the original manufacturer, Monsanto, as Roundup, although it is found in other brands such as Bayer, Rosate and Rodeo. It is also used in a lot of supermarket and garden centre own-brands.

Is it dangerous?

There is no question that weedkillers containing glyphosate are dangerous. If it gets on the skin it can cause irritation and dermatitis. It can also cause oral and throat discomfort if it is breathed in. Eye exposure may lead to mild conjunctivitis. If swallowed it may cause corrosion of the throat and can lead to kidney or liver failure.

It is also believed that it can cause cancer. In March 2015 the International Agency on research into Carcinogens (IARC) announced that glyphosate probably caused a type of cancer called non-Hodgkin lymphoma. This was based on a study of agricultural workers who were exposed to the chemical, although it was backed up by tests on animals. However it is not known whether the cancer is being caused by contact through the skin or through breathing it, or both. It is therefore necessary to try to prevent any workers coming into contact with glyphosate.

Who is at risk?

Glyphosate is commonly used in agriculture and gardening in the UK. Workers that could be exposed will include parks staff, agricultural workers, gardeners, and some forestry workers. It is not only those who are using the chemical who may be at risk, but also those working around them when the herbicide is being applied.

What does the law say?

All substances that could be hazardous to health are covered by the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 2002 (COSHH). These state that the employer must try to prevent exposure totally. If that is not possible they should control it so the risk of harm is 'as low as is reasonably practicable'. That means

that they should first see what can be done to avoid using any chemicals by changing how they work. If it has to be used they should look at less dangerous substitutes, and if, not is not possible, make sure that they are protecting the worker through things such as introducing new methods of working such as automation, and if that can't be done they should provide personal protective equipment free of charge. They also need to provide information and training for all those who use the chemical or who may be exposed.

Whether there is a risk and how it need to be controlled is decided after a risk assessment. There is also a requirement for the employer to consult with workers, (through union health and safety representatives if they exist).

Herbicides are also covered by separate regulations which say that employers must

- Take all reasonable precautions to protect human health and the environment;
- Confine the application of the pesticide to the crops or area to be treated;
- Ensure when using pesticides in certain specified areas, e.g. those used by the general public, that the amount of pesticide used and the frequency of use are as low as are reasonably practicable.

What does that mean for employers who use glyphosate?

Given that the risks to the skin, lung and eyes have been known about for many years, employers should already have been taking action to prevent any contact to gyphosate, even before there was evidence it causes cancer

Now that there is new evidence that glyphosate is likely to cause cancer, all employers must review their risk assessments, including their COSHH assessments. Where possible they should consider alternatives to the use of herbicides, but if that is not possible they must investigate whether there are safer alternatives. If there are alternatives then they should be introduced, regardless of whether they are more expensive. However they should not rush into substituting another herbicide for glyphosate without ensuring that they know the risk from the substitute. All herbicides are likely to have some dangers to humans.

If they are going to continue to use glyphosate then they should look at whether there are alternatives to how it is used now. Often it is sprayed from backpacks (which often leak) and are filled in an enclosed space. The employer must consider alternative ways of applying it and also look at how containers are filled, cleaned and the chemical stored and disposed of. They also need to provide training and information to the workers about the risk.

If, after that, any workers are still likely to come into contact with glyphosate, they must provide protective clothing. That may include gloves, masks and protective

overalls. This must be done free of charge, and arrangements need to be made for them to be stored and cleaned. The safety representatives should be involved in any discussion on the best protective equipment.

Employers should also be monitoring the health of all those who use glyphosate (or any pesticide).

Role of Union health and safety representatives.

No workers should be put at risk of exposure to any substance that can lead to cancer. Many employers will not know about the risks from glyphosate, especially as the manufacturers still continue to insist there is no risk, despite the evidence. Health and safety representatives should make sure they bring the information to their attention.

Safety representatives must ensure that their employer reviews their risk assessments and share the results with them. You have the right to this information!

You should try to ensure that what the employer is doing is going to be effective in protecting your members. The measures outlined in the section on what the employer should do will help you in this, but if you need advice then you should contact your union.

Inform your members about what is happening, and why.

More information

Details of the IIRC study can be found at:

<http://www.iarc.fr/en/media-centre/iarcnews/pdf/MonographVolume112.pdf>

The HSE pesticides pages are at:

<http://www.pesticides.gov.uk/guidance/industries/pesticides/home>