



THE BRITISH ADHESIVES AND SEALANTS ASSOCIATION

## **Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Safe Use of Retail Adhesives and Sealants**

Published: Dec 2013

Issue Number: 1

Prepared by: H&S WG



**Shared inputs make greater outputs**

## Disclaimer

The information contained in this document is intended for **guidance** only and whilst the information is provided in utmost good faith and has been based on the best information currently available, it is to be relied upon at the user's own risk. No representations or warranties are made with regard to its completeness or accuracy and no liability will be accepted by BASA nor any company participating in BASA for damages of any nature whatsoever resulting from the use of or reliance on the information.

## **How safe are the adhesives and sealants that are on sale in the shops?**

*All adhesives and sealants may be used safely and without risk to health, provided that they are handled with care and in accordance with the manufacturer's recommendations. Whilst there has been a significant move away from the more hazardous formulations in recent years, there is a limit to how safe a product can be and still do the job for which it is designed. Because of this it is important to read the label and understand what it means and what precautions you need to take.*

*There are a number of chemically different products being sold as adhesives and sealants, for a variety of different applications. A very few of these are unsuitable for use in a DIY situation and are labelled "Restricted to professional users": you should not see these in a retail outlet. Anything you can purchase retail can be handled safely although some care may need to be taken; usually it is sufficient to choose the right product for the job you want to do and then check how to use it safely. Exactly what kind of precautions have to be taken will depend on the ingredients of the product, and will be indicated on the label.*

## **You say "read the label". What am I looking for?**

*Products that are relatively non-hazardous may simply carry brief safety advice anywhere on the label. Those that need some extra care are required by law to have warnings and advice within a dedicated area of the label (known as the "safety panel"). This area will often contain one or more hazard symbols, and will also have some standard phrases describing the risks associated with the product and safety advice for handling. It will also include the name and address of the supplier or manufacturer.*

*The content of this panel will tell you what you need to know for most situations.*

*A new system of hazard symbols is currently being introduced, so you may see some products using the old symbols, consisting of black images in orange boxes, and some using the new system, which uses black images in white diamonds with red borders. The two systems are quite similar but there are some differences in the symbols and the criteria that determine when they should appear on the label.*

## **So what do these symbols mean?**

*The symbols are intended to draw attention to the main types of hazards associated with the product, and give an indication of how severe they are. Having had your attention drawn you will still need to read the accompanying text.*

*There are eight symbols you are quite likely to see on adhesive packages:*

Old system	New system	
		<p>The meaning of these symbols is reasonably obvious: they indicate that the product is highly flammable. Usually this is because it contains a solvent that is intended to evaporate after application, and this solvent will catch fire easily if an ignition source is nearby. In large quantities in confined spaces it may even form an explosive mixture with air. Pay particular attention to naked flames (don't smoke!) and make sure ventilation is very good if you are applying to large areas. Typically seen on contact adhesives. You will sometimes see the word "flammable" without the symbol: this indicates that the product will still catch fire if ignited, but not quite as easily.</p>
		<p>These symbols indicate that the product is corrosive. If you get it on your skin it may cause a burn, and could cause you serious harm if it gets in your eyes. You will often find it on the tubes of hardener sold as part of a two-part epoxy adhesive pack.</p>
		<p>These symbols are used to indicate a number of different hazards so it is important to read the text in the safety panel on the label to understand what hazards they refer to.</p> <p>If the product is said to be "HARMFUL" it means that it can damage your health if you swallow it, inhale it or get it on your skin, albeit in relatively large amounts. The text in the safety panel should say which routes of entry into the body you need to consider.</p> <p>If the product is described as an "IRRITANT" this means that it can cause irritation to the skin, eyes or the respiratory system.</p> <p>Also, if you see one of these symbols look to see if the safety panel includes the wording "May cause sensitisation by skin contact" or "May cause allergic skin reaction". Although many of us are unaffected, some individuals may become sensitised (i.e. develop allergic reactions) after repeated contact with some of the chemicals (such as epoxy resins) commonly used in adhesives and sealants.</p> <p>Under the new labelling system the exclamation mark symbol can also indicate that a product gives off vapours that may cause drowsiness or dizziness if inhaled in large quantities. If the product is labelled under the old system, this hazard will be mentioned in the wording in the safety panel only, and no symbol will be used.</p>

		<p>These symbols indicate that the product is dangerous to the environment: usually a classification based on how toxic it is to aquatic creatures and how long it persists. Take it as a warning to make sure the container is properly emptied and disposed of responsibly.</p>
---	---	---

The symbols below may also be seen on some labels. They are rarely seen on products on retail sale, and can indicate high toxicity, long-term health hazards or toxic effects affecting a specific organ.



### Should I be wearing any sort of protective clothing or gloves?

Many of the adhesive and sealant products for sale in retail outlets can cause skin irritation, although that will depend on the sensitivity of the person handling them. You should not assume because you have had a product on your skin in the past without problems, you needn't worry about it in the future: some adhesives (notably two part epoxies) can cause sensitisation. Also, most adhesives are very difficult to remove from your hands after use: you can cause problems simply by the amount of scrubbing you need to do cleaning up after you have finished the job. It is a good idea to wear gloves: they need to be impermeable so the adhesive won't soak through. For most small DIY jobs disposable polythene gloves should be adequate: these should only be worn once: as soon as they are contaminated or when you have finished the job throw them away. For very small jobs when you think skin contact is unlikely use of a barrier cream is a possible alternative.

It goes without saying that you don't want adhesive in your eyes. In many cases this simply isn't a risk, however if it is (for instance if you are using an aerosol) then, as with many DIY jobs, it is advisable to wear eye protection.

### What should I do if I get an adhesive or sealant on my skin?

If the product hasn't dried or cured it may be quite easy to remove. Some adhesives, notably those sold for use with timber and similar products, are waterborne (these are normally white in colour, and dry clear). If you get your hands under a tap without delay it may wash off. Otherwise, and for most other adhesives, there is little alternative to using a mildly abrasive proprietary hand cleaner. Do not use solvents or abrasive materials (other than hand cleaners): they may do more harm than the material you are removing.

**I've got this rash and I think it might have something to do with an adhesive I've been using. What should I do?**

*A very small minority of people can have an allergic reaction to some chemicals, and they can also become sensitised to them, meaning that they react to increasingly low exposure levels. Check the label on the pack and look for the words "May cause sensitisation" or "May cause an allergic skin reaction". If you have persistent skin irritation you should see your GP, and it will help if you can show the label of the product you suspect. Also, if you have been handling adhesives, you've probably been in contact with a few other things that you might be susceptible to (like cleaners for instance); don't forget to take along labels from them as well.*

**Where can I find out more?**

*All products legally classified as hazardous (i.e. anything with a safety panel plus some others) is required by law to have a Safety Data Sheet, carrying more detailed safety information. While intended primarily for professional users, they should be available to any user on request. You may be able to get a Safety Data Sheet for the product you are interested in from the retail outlet where you purchased it; if you are having difficulty the supplier whose name is on the label (look in the safety panel if there is one) should be able to help.*

*Further information from the UK Health & Safety Executive on how to read safety panels, etc. can be found on the following website:*

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg352.pdf>

*Also, information on understanding the new system of hazard symbols can be found here:*

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/chemical-classification/index.htm>

## Briefing prepared by

The BASA Health and Safety Working Group  
December 2013

All questions and comments relating to this briefing should be addressed to the BASA Office.