Transitioning to Globally-harmonized WHMIS: An Overview

What is WHMIS?

Canada's Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, commonly known as WHMIS, is designed to provide workers with information about hazardous products used, stored, handled or disposed of in the workplace.

This system is mandated by federal, provincial and territorial law. The main purpose of federal WHMIS legislation is to require suppliers of hazardous products to provide health and safety information as a condition of sale. Provincial legislation establishes employer duties to obtain this information and ensure workers have access and understand it.

There are three ways this information must be provided:

◆ **labels on hazardous products**,
◆ **safety data sheets** (SDSs) offering more detailed hazard, safety and emergency information, and
◆ **worker education** (both general and workplace-specific).

In Ontario, WHMIS applies to all workplaces covered by the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* along with federally regulated workplaces governed by the *Canada Labour Code*.

Ontario, and other jurisdictions across Canada, are transitioning from WHMIS to the new Globally-harmonized (GHS) WHMIS (transition will end in December, 2018). During this transition, **employers must train workers in both systems**. GHS WHMIS can become the sole focus of worker training only when all products with the original WHMIS labels and MSDSs are no longer used in the workplace.

Has Globally-harmonized WHMIS altered the delivery of this information?

Yes. The original WHMIS has been modified to incorporate elements of the Global Harmonized System of Classification and Labelling of Chemicals (GHS). The purpose of GHS is to standardize chemical hazard classification and communication on a global scale. This change will result in new standardized:

◆ **hazard classes** (including pictograms – formerly called hazard symbols),
◆ **hazardous product labels**, and
◆ **safety data sheets** (SDSs) (formerly called material safety data sheets – MSDSs).

Hazard Classes/Pictograms

The new GHS WHMIS consists of more than 30 specific hazard classes divided into three hazard groups:

◆ **physical** (i.e., flammability, reactivity and asphyxiation),
◆ **health** (i.e., eye and skin irritation, reproductive toxicity and carcinogenicity), and
◆ **environmental** (i.e., hazard to aquatic life and ozone layer).*

* GHS introduced an environmental hazard group and an explosive class that are not adopted by new WHMIS law. Still, suppliers and workplaces have the option of including relevant information on labels and SDSs (see pg 2).

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Each hazard class is represented by one or more of the 10 pictograms (formerly known as WHMIS hazard symbols of which there were eight). Each pictogram acts as a visual alert to a particular safety, health and/or environmental hazard associated with a specific product. They must be diamond shaped with red borders except for one that is a black circle representing biohazardous infectious materials (previous WHMIS hazard symbols were circle shaped).

Supplier/Workplace Labels

Similar to original WHMIS requirements, under Globally-harmonized WHMIS the **supplier** of a hazardous product must still provide **labels** in english and french. Employers must still ensure they are affixed to the product/container. Required elements on a supplier label include:
→ **product name**,
→ **hazard pictograms**,
→ **signal word** (danger or warning),
→ **hazard statements**,
→ **precautionary statements**,*
→ **supplier name and contact information**, and
→ **supplemental hazard information**.

*The original WHMIS required a first aid section on the supplier label. This information is now required under precautionary statements.

The pictogram(s), signal word and hazard statements must be grouped together.

The employer must ensure a **workplace label** is produced and affixed to a product/container if:

✓ **a hazardous product is produced and used in the workplace**,
✓ **a hazardous product is transferred into a container,** or
✓ **a supplier label becomes lost or unreadable**.

Specific content requirements for workplace labels fall under provincial or territorial legislation or the *Canada Labour Code* (for federally regulated workplaces).

Safety Data Sheets (SDSs)

The original WHMIS material safety data sheet (MSDS) required nine information categories. The new **safety data sheet** (SDS) adds additional information requirements in a standard 16 section format, including fire-fighting measures. Also new are sections for ecological information, disposal considerations, transport information and regulatory information. Suppliers, however, can opt to not provide information under these last four headers.

The supplier of a hazardous product must provide SDSs in both english and french.

Employers must ensure SDSs are readily available to workers and members of a joint health and safety committee or worker representative. They must be updated when significant new data becomes available.

How do employers comply with WHMIS training requirements?

Generic WHMIS education can apply to any workplace. The employer though must also provide workers with additional WHMIS training applicable to the specific work to be performed.

With the transition to GHS WHMIS lasting until December, 2018 (see below), employers may have both original WHMIS labels and MSDSs and new labels and SDSs present in the workplace. Again, if this is the case, they will need to educate workers about both systems. To be in compliance with the law, workers must understand WHMIS and be able to apply the information gained through this training to their everyday work.

Compliance Transition Period*

Phase	Compliance Dates	Suppliers**		Employer
		Manufacturers and Importers	**Distributors**	
Phase 1	From February 11, 2015 to May 31, 2017	Original WHMIS or Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Original WHMIS or Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Consult federal, provincial or territorial regulations
Phase 2	From June 1, 2017 to May 31, 2018	Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Original WHMIS or Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Original WHMIS or Globally-harmonized WHMIS
Phase 3	From June 1, 2018 to November 30, 2018	Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Original WHMIS or Globally-harmonized WHMIS
Transition complete	December 1, 2018	Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Globally-harmonized WHMIS	Globally-harmonized WHMIS

**Beginning now, the supplier of a hazardous product must fully comply with either original WHMIS or the new GHS WHMIS requirements.