

Frequently Asked Questions Regarding The Safe Handling of Retail Adhesives

How safe are the adhesives that are on sale in the shops?

All adhesives 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, 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 orange boxes containing 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.

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 four symbols you are quite likely to see on adhesive packages:

	<p>This symbol is reasonably obvious: it means 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 ignited. 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>This symbol indicates 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><i>This one is accompanied by the word “HARMFUL” or “IRRITANT”. If a product is classed as “Harmful” it means that it can damage your health if you swallow or inhale it or get it on your skin, albeit in relatively large amounts. To see what route of entry into the body you need to worry about you need to read the text near it in the safety panel. “IRRITANT” means what it says: causes irritation to the skin or eyes. If a product is both irritant and harmful, the only word under the symbol is “Harmful”: check the label wording to see if it is irritant as well. Also if you see this symbol look to see if the safety panel includes the wording “May cause sensitisation by skin contact”; 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.</i></p>
	<p><i>This symbol indicates 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.</i></p>

There is a fifth symbol, a skull and crossbones with the word “TOXIC”. This is rarely seen on products on retail sale, and indicates either high toxicity or a long-term health risk.

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

Many of the adhesive 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 have adhesive on my skin?

If it hasn't dried or cured it may be quite easy to remove. Some adhesives, notable 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 chemically based products, and also they may become sensitised so that they react to increasingly low exposure levels; check the label on the pack and look for the words “Irritant” and “May cause sensitisation”. 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 classed as hazardous (ie: 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/chip/information.htm>

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28/03/06