

Health and safety risk assessment

Faced with the mass of legislation, meeting your health and safety requirements can seem an enormous task. Fortunately, the most critical part of managing health and safety - risk assessment - is relatively straightforward.



The process

Accidents waiting to happen

Common hazards

Longer-term health risks

Existing precautions

Improving safety

Paperwork

1. The process

In most work environments, you (or your health and safety officer) can carry out the risk assessment, calling in specialist help for specific hazards (eg to monitor levels of airborne particles or noise).

Identify the hazards

- Physically inspect your premises and the tasks carried out there.
- Ask employees and safety representatives what hazards they are aware of. Working as a small team, with an insider from each department to provide experience and an outsider for a fresh eye, can be useful.
- Check suppliers' instructions and information on equipment and materials.
- Check your records of accidents and sickness. These may point to hazards.
- If your work varies, or you operate on different sites, include other hazards which you can expect to come across.
- See [Accidents waiting to happen](#), [Common hazards](#) and [Longer-term health risks](#).

Decide who could be affected

- You are responsible for the health and safety of everyone who could be affected, not just your employees.
- Visitors, contractors and new employees may be at extra risk. Bear in mind that they may not be aware of your safety procedures.
- Consider those who are particularly at risk (eg pregnant women, people who work alone and those with a disability).

Evaluate how likely it is that employees and others could be hurt

- Consider how effective your [existing precautions](#) are.
- If there are any specific legal requirements affecting your industry, have you complied with them?
- Do you meet industry standards?
- What risk remains? How many people could it affect, and how badly?

Decide what you can do to remove or minimise the risk

- Ideally, you should remove the hazard altogether.
- Most risks can be reduced to acceptable levels with simple procedures and systems.
- Consider additional measures, which are reasonably workable, to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. For example, warning signs or personal protective equipment.
- See [Improving safety](#).

Record the outcome of your health and safety risk assessment

- Include any corrective action taken.
- The written record can be a useful reminder of areas you may need to keep under review.
- See [Paperwork](#).

Review your assessment regularly

- For example, once a year.
- You will also need to update your assessment when circumstances change (eg when you acquire new equipment).

2. Accidents waiting to happen

There are many places in every office, shop or factory where some sort of hazard can be identified.

Particular situations may well lead to particular kinds of accident. These may be quite hard to recognise when you are looking around familiar premises, so a checklist approach is useful.

Identify places where people to trip or slip when moving around

- Look for uneven floors, loose cables and potential spillages.
- Note areas where poor lighting might increase the risk from these hazards.

Look out for sharp corners and open drawers that people might walk

into

Check doors and crossings where people might collide

- People carrying large items or pushing loaded trolleys may not be able to see where they are going.

Pay special attention to staircases and unguarded drops where people might fall

Make a note of areas where people might be hit by falling objects

- Look for unstable stacking or poor storage. Even files falling down from a high shelf could cause serious injuries.

3. Common hazards

A hazard is something that could possibly harm or injure someone. Machinery, power tools and inflammable or corrosive materials can create specific accident hazards in the workplace.

But even an office with just a few items of office machinery, consumables, heaters, fans and kettles could contain many hazards.

Unsafe electrical installations can start fires or cause electric shocks

- For example, old or damaged wiring or overloaded sockets.
- Electrical equipment can be particularly dangerous if it is poorly maintained or portable.

Machinery can cut or catch people, or give off harmful substances, particles or fumes

- Machines may also create unacceptable levels of noise, especially if poorly maintained.
- All moving vehicles are potentially dangerous.
- Some machinery is naturally hazardous (eg pressure boilers, lifts, lathes).

Any hazardous substances that you use or produce could cause injury or ill health

- Inflammable goods that are not properly stored present a fire hazard.
- Solid or liquid waste that is not properly treated or disposed of can be a health or fire hazard.
- Toxic or corrosive materials may cause poisoning or burns.

There may be special hazards resulting from the nature of your business

For example:

- burns and scalds in catering businesses;
- falling objects on construction sites;

- dangerous chemicals, tools or machinery associated with your particular industry (eg solvents, presses).

4. Longer-term health risks

Apart from the possibility of accidents, there are risks to your employees' health that may only build up over a period of time. These must also form part of your health and safety assessment.

Look out for factors that put employees under physical or mental stress

- Poor lighting can lead to eye strain and headaches.
- Inadequate ventilation makes people tired and more likely to have accidents. It can also lead to the rapid spread of infectious diseases in the workplace.
- Uncomfortably high or low temperatures make it hard to concentrate and make employees more vulnerable to illness.
- Excessive noise can lead to headaches or even hearing loss.
- Poor air quality (eg from ink or paint fumes) can be an irritant or even a health hazard.

Poor design of chairs and equipment can cause musculoskeletal problems

- For example, back pain and upper limb problems.

Manual handling of objects can lead to unnecessary injuries and back problems

- Consider the layout of the workflow and whether storage is adequate.
- Watch out for bad practice and inadequate training.

There can be particular health problems for people working with computers

Make sure:

- PC screens are clear and flicker-free, and can be adjusted, and are free from glare;
- desks and chairs are adjustable to the right height, and employees are shown how to make these adjustments;
- footrests and other means of support are offered to those who need them;
- working practices include regular breaks away from the screen and the keyboard.

Set up a smoking policy

- Smoking is banned in all commercial premises and enclosed public places.

5. Existing precautions

For every hazard you have identified, decide whether your existing precautions are adequate.

Your precautions must be sufficient to reduce the risk to an acceptable level

- If necessary, take advice.

Your precautions should meet industry standards

- Your trade association may be able to provide advice or information.
- You may want to include management of health and safety as part of a benchmarking exercise against other companies.

Ideally, your precautions will reduce risk as far as is reasonable

- You are fully justified in balancing cost against risk in deciding what precautions are reasonable steps.

Reasonable steps

The law recognises it is not always possible for an employer to remove every risk.

For example:

- if an employee has to visit a room full of noisy machinery once a month for ten minutes, providing ear muffs should be adequate;
- If an employee occasionally has to cross a busy loading bay, providing a designated marked route with warning signs should be adequate.

When the hazards are encountered more frequently, or the number of employees involved rises, the risk becomes unacceptable and you will be required to take further steps.

6. Improving safety

Give priority to controlling risks which could affect large numbers of people or result in serious harm to individuals.

The best option is to remove a hazard altogether

- For example, installing improved flooring or lighting, using safer machinery or using non-flammable materials.

You can control risks with suitable systems and procedures

These might include:

- procedures for dealing with simple hazards (eg spillages);

- physically separating employees from hazards (eg by setting up safety barriers or restricting access to certain areas);
- insisting that staff take regular rest breaks to prevent tiredness;
- developing a sound, workable evacuation plan, in case of emergencies.

You can improve effectiveness by providing appropriate information and training

- Employees must be given training before being exposed to the hazards. Make it part of your induction programme.
- The training should make it clear how seriously you take health and safety. Make it clear that failure to follow the procedures will be viewed as a disciplinary offence.
- Ideally, induction and training should be recorded, with the trainee's signature as confirmation of having received the training.
- Use signs to warn people of hazards.

You can reduce risk by minimising exposure to the hazard

- Only suitably trained employees should be allowed to operate or repair dangerous machinery.
- A 'permit-to-work' system can be used to control access to particularly dangerous situations.

Provide personal protective equipment as a last resort

- Protective clothing, goggles and ear defenders should only be used when other steps are unrealistic or are insufficient on their own.

Regular safety monitoring will help to ensure that your precautions are working

This monitoring should include:

- regular visual inspection of the workplace;
- records of all incidents, including illness, accidents and 'near misses';
- planned maintenance and routine equipment inspection;
- legally required inspections for some possibly dangerous equipment, including boilers, lifts and air-conditioning installations.

If a serious incident occurs, it must be reported and investigated

7. Paperwork

Keep records of any risk assessments

If you have five or more employees, you must keep detailed written records showing that:

- you made a full assessment, using specialist help where appropriate;
- you have dealt with all the obvious significant hazards;
- you have put reasonable precautions in place to ensure that the remaining risk is acceptably

low.

Your records can include cross-references to other documents

- For example, your company's manuals and health and safety procedures.

Signpost

- Find [risk assessment guidance](#) from the Health & Safety Executive (HSE).
- Find [risk assessment examples](#) and a template from the HSE.
- Find guidance on [fire risk assessment](#) on GOV.UK.
- [Report a serious incident online](#).
- Find a [trade association](#) for information on safety standards for your industry through the Trade Association Forum.
- Find guidance on [health and safety advisers](#) from the HSE or search the [Occupational Safety and Health Consultants Register](#).

Note

Health and safety law is complex. This factsheet reflects our understanding of the basic legal position as known at the last update. Get legal advice on your own specific circumstances and check whether any relevant rules have changed.

Expert quote

"Keep your risk assessments current and keep them in an easy and user-friendly format and style. Don't get too complicated - keep them practical, otherwise nobody will want to read or use them." - Sypol

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