Your health and safety guide to
Controlling OHS hazards and risks
If this Subject Guide does not contain an up-to-date More information sheet, please go to www.worksafe.vic.gov.au to download the PDF or contact us on 1800 136 089 to request a printed copy.

There’s plenty more information about health and safety...
www.worksafe.vic.gov.au
1800 136 089
Too many people are killed or maimed at work each year.

The real tragedy is that most of these incidents could have been prevented with better planning.

A systematic approach to finding potential problems and fixing them – before things go wrong – is the best way to protect people and ensure compliance with the law.

This guide will help you understand what to look for, and will explain what you need to do to make your workplace safe.
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Glossary
What are hazards and risks?

A hazard is anything in the workplace that has the potential to harm people. Hazards can include objects in the workplace, such as machinery or dangerous chemicals. Other hazards relate to the way work is done. For instance, hazards on a production line could include manual handling, excessive noise and fatigue caused by the pace of work.

A risk arises when it’s possible that a hazard will actually cause harm. The level of risk will depend on factors such as how often the job is done, the number of workers involved and how serious any injuries that result could be.

A systematic approach

A safe workplace doesn’t happen by chance or guesswork. It requires a systematic approach to finding and fixing hazards and risks. This approach ensures the highest level of protection is in place for people at work.

It begins with consulting staff on any potential health and safety issues and typically follows four steps:

- finding hazards in the workplace that could hurt people
- figuring out (assessing) how people can be hurt and the likelihood of the hazards hurting people (the level of risk)
- fixing the problems by deciding on the most effective risk controls that are reasonably practicable under the circumstances
- reviewing your risk controls and checking that they work.

Sometimes the problems are obvious and can be easy to fix (e.g. installing machine guarding or keeping the workplace tidy). In some cases, OHS laws relating to specific hazards require you to do certain things in identifying hazards and controlling risks. In other cases the solutions won’t be quite as obvious.

A systematic approach is particularly helpful when there is limited knowledge about the hazards and how to control the risks in the particular circumstances.
Your legal duties

The law

**Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004 (OHS Act)**

The OHS Act came into effect on 1 July 2005. It sets out the key principles, duties and rights in relation to occupational health and safety. The general nature of the duties imposed by the Act means that they cover a wide variety of circumstances, do not readily date and there is considerable flexibility for a duty-holder to determine what needs to be done to comply.

The OHS Act is based upon the following key health and safety principles:

- All people – employees and the general public – should have the highest level of protection against risks to health and safety.
- Those who manage or control things that create health and safety risks in the workplace are responsible for eliminating or reducing the risks, so far as is reasonably practicable.
- Employers should be proactive in promoting health and safety in the workplace.
- Information and ideas about risks and how to control them should be shared between employers and employees.
- Employees are entitled – and should be encouraged – to be represented in relation to health and safety issues.

**Occupational Health and Safety Regulations 2007 (OHS Regulations 2007)**

New Regulations for occupational health and safety came into effect on 1 July 2007. The Regulations impose specific legal responsibilities for the identification of hazards and control of risks on employers and employees.
Employers

By law, employers must provide a safe working environment for their employees, as far as is reasonably practicable. This means you must eliminate any risks to health and safety, as far as is reasonably practicable. If it’s not reasonably practicable to eliminate the risks, you must reduce them as far as practicable.

In addition to protecting the safety of your workers, you also must ensure that other people (such as your customers, visitors and the general public) are not exposed to risks as a result of your business.

As well as these general duties, you need to know what the law says about your industry and what particular risks you need to manage at your workplace. Industry and hazard specific guidance is available from the WorkSafe Advisory Service (1800 138 089) or online at www.worksafe.vic.gov.au

Employees

Your employer is required to protect you from risks in the workplace.

At the same time, you have a general duty to take reasonable care for your own health and safety, and that of others who may be affected by your work, and to cooperate with your employer’s efforts to make the workplace safe.

This may include following workplace policies and procedures, attending health and safety training, and helping to identify hazards and risks.
Compliance and enforcement

WorkSafe applies a strategy of ‘constructive compliance’ – a combination of incentives and deterrents – to improve workplace health and safety.

This strategy recognises that real and sustainable improvement in workplace health and safety requires active involvement from employers and employees in identifying hazards and controlling risks.

WorkSafe inspectors have the primary role of targeting unsafe workplace activity, enforcing compliance with health and safety laws, and providing guidance and advice on how to comply with those laws.

Further information on workplace inspections and WorkSafe’s enforcement policy is available through the WorkSafe Advisory Service (1800 136 089) or at www.worksafe.vic.gov.au
Consult

Employees’ expertise can make a significant contribution to improving workplace health and safety.

Regular, proactive consultation can help identify issues in the workplace and build a strong commitment to health and safety by including all views in the decision-making process.

Under the OHS Act, employers must consult with employees when identifying and assessing hazards or risks, and making decisions about risk control.

‘Employees’ includes independent contractor(s) (and any employees of the independent contractor(s)) who perform work which the employer has, or should have, control over.

If employees are represented by health and safety representatives, the consultation must involve those representatives – see Your health and safety guide to Consultation for further information.

WorkSafe has a range of guidance materials to advise on the required processes and actions that duty-holders must take in order to meet their legal obligations. Compliance Codes, Health and Safety Solutions and Guidance Notes each provide detailed and specific advice for duty-holders seeking to comply with the OHS Regulations 2007. See also the enclosed More information sheet for a listing of guidance materials related to Controlling OHS hazards and risks.
How to comply continued

Find

Working closely with your employees, look at every task in your workplace to find potential hazards (that is, anything that could be harmful). It’s a good idea to write everything down. To get started, visit WorkSafe’s website www.worksafe.vic.gov.au to download our safety action plan.

Some hazards will be obvious because they’ll be common to your industry, but others won’t be.

Learn more about causes and prevention of injuries in specific industries, such as emergency services, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, transport and storage. Look at the history of accidents in your particular industry. You should also talk to other people in your industry and share their experiences.

Research the health and safety topics that relate to your workplace (for example, manual handling, chemicals, bullying and occupational violence, stress, falls).

Not all injuries are immediately apparent. Some are only discovered over time, such as illnesses caused by long-term exposure to certain chemicals.

Go through any injury records you have. They might show you if problem areas exist, or if any patterns are emerging. If you don’t currently keep a written record of workplace injuries – and near misses – start now.

When to assess risk

A risk assessment builds knowledge and understanding about hazards and risks that have been identified so that informed decisions can be taken about controlling them.

It does not have to be a long, complex process involving lots of paperwork. Risk assessment is a means to an end, not an end in itself. As such, it should be straightforward, purposeful and actionable.

While risk assessment is an important part of the process for controlling unknown risks, you may not need to conduct a formal assessment if a risk is well known and the solution is obvious.
As a general guide, a risk assessment should be done if:
- there is only limited knowledge about a hazard or risk or how the risk may result in injury or illness
- there is uncertainty about whether all of the things that can go wrong have been found
- the situation involves a number of different hazards that are part of the same work process or piece of plant and there is a lack of understanding about how the hazards may impact on each other to produce new or greater risks.

Risk assessment involves:
- determining what levels of harm can occur
- determining how harm can occur
- determining the likelihood that harm will occur.

Fix

When you’ve identified the hazards in your workplace and, where necessary, assessed the risk, you need to start immediately on the most important step of all – fixing the problems.

The various ways of controlling risks can be ranked from the highest level of protection and reliability to the lowest.
Your first aim should be to totally remove the risk.

**Example:** If the risk involves a hazardous chemical, try to find a non-hazardous alternative.

If it’s not possible to totally remove a risk, you need to find ways to control it by reducing the likelihood or degree of harm.

Risk can be reduced by:

**Changing the risk**

This is the most effective way of reducing risk and involves:

- substituting the risk with a lesser risk
  
  **Example:** Replace 40kg bags of cement with 20kg bags to reduce the risk of body stressing (back and shoulder injuries) from lifting and moving.

- using engineering methods or changing the work process
  
  **Example:** Placing a guard on a machine.

- isolating people from the risk
  
  **Example:** Moving noisy equipment away from where people normally work.

**Changing people**

This is less effective as it relies on people acting as expected. It involves:

- administrative controls

  **Example:** Training and instructing a child care worker on correct techniques for lifting children onto a change table to control the manual handling risk.

- personal protective equipment

  **Example:** Breathing protection, aprons and protective eyewear.

You’ll often find there are simple solutions to many of the hazards in your workplace. Most of them will be inexpensive, and some will cost nothing at all. Of course, sometimes solutions may not be so straightforward. What do you do then?

- Contact WorkSafe’s Advisory Service (1800 136 089) or visit www.worksafe.vic.gov.au to see if there’s a common solution to the problem.

  WorkSafe produces a range of industry – and hazard-specific publications, alerts and guidance notes to help you control the risks in your workplace.

- Get help from associations or groups that are related to your particular industry – they might have come across a similar problem before and have found a way to fix it.

- Talk to other people in your industry to see how they’ve handled similar problems.
Review

Controlling OHS hazards and risks is an ongoing process that needs to take account of changes in the workplace. That’s why you should review your procedures and risk controls regularly, to ensure they are working well and are still relevant.

You should do this in consultation with employees and health and safety representatives at least whenever any changes are made to the workplace, if any injuries have occurred or you become aware of any new health and safety information about the hazards and risks.

If you need to update things, make sure you inform all staff about any changes.
Administrative control – Using methods such as policies, procedures, safety signs, training or supervision, or a combination of methods, to control risk.

Employee – A person employed under a contract of employment or contract of training.

Employer – A person who employs one or more people under contracts of employment or contracts of training.

Health and safety representative (HSR) – A member of a designated work group elected to represent employees on matters relating to occupational health and safety.

Hierarchy of control – The descending order of effectiveness of different types of control measures that may be applied following an assessment of possible risk control.

Manual handling – Any activity requiring the use of force exerted by a person to lift, push, pull, carry or otherwise move, hold or restrain any object.

Personal protective equipment – Equipment or clothing used to provide protection, e.g. gloves, safety glasses, hard hats, goggles, earmuffs, safety shoes, respirators and fall arrest systems.

Reasonably practicable – See section 20(2) of the OHS Act and the WorkSafe Position on How WorkSafe applies the law in relation to reasonably practicable.
In this series

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Your health and safety guide to asbestos
Your health and safety guide to confined spaces
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Your health and safety guide to falls prevention
Your health and safety guide to hazardous substances
Your health and safety guide to lead
Your health and safety guide to manual handling
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Your health and safety guide to consultation
Your health and safety guide to controlling OHS hazards and risks
Your health and safety guide to licensing and registrations
Your health and safety guide to workplace amenities and first aid

Visit www.worksafe.vic.gov.au for online guidance on all of these topics and more...

The information presented in Your health and safety guide to controlling OHS hazards and risks is intended for general use only. It should not be viewed as a definitive guide to the law, and should be read in conjunction with the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004.

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WorkSafe Victoria is a division of the Victorian WorkCover Authority.
WorkSafe
Victoria

WorkSafe Advisory Service
222 Exhibition Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
Phone 03 9641 1444
Toll-free 1800 136 089
Email info@worksafe.vic.gov.au

Head Office
222 Exhibition Street
Melbourne VIC 3000
Phone 03 9641 1555
Toll-free 1800 136 089
Website www.worksafe.vic.gov.au

Local Offices
Ballarat 03 5338 4444
Bendigo 03 5443 8866
Dandenong 03 8792 9000
Geelong 03 5226 1200
Melbourne (628 Bourke Street) 03 9941 0558
Mildura 03 5021 4001
Mulgrave 03 9565 9444
Preston 03 9485 4555
Shepparton 03 5831 8260
Traralgon 03 5174 8900
Wangaratta 03 5721 8588
Warrnambool 03 5564 3200