



A Brief Guide to Health & Safety in the Workplace



This guide aims to raise awareness of your legal rights and responsibilities, as an employee, so that you can enjoy a safe and healthy workplace.

Employers' Duties

Employers have legal obligations to ensure a safe and healthy workplace for their employees in the first instance – and also for anyone else who may visit the workplace such as customers, contractors and members of the public.

Regardless of the size of their business, all employers must:

- design, provide and maintain workplaces which are safe and without risk to health;
- identify any hazards (actual or potential) and take measures to control the risks, preferably by eliminating them – but if that is not possible, by reducing them as far as possible;
- ensure that safe working practices are developed and implemented,
- implement measures to reduce the risk of bullying and harassment;
- provide adequate first aid facilities;
- provide employees with information, instructions, and training set up contingency plans to deal with accidents and emergencies (including the evacuation of the workplace);
- ensure that ventilation, temperature, lighting, toilet, washing and rest facilities meet the standard of health, safety and welfare sought by the statutory bodies;
- ensure that appropriate work equipment is provided and is properly used and regularly maintained;
- take necessary precautions against the risks caused by flammable or explosive hazards, electrical equipment, noise, dust and radiation;
- take reasonable steps to avoid potentially dangerous work involving manual handling and provide manual handling training where required;
- provide health supervision, as needed;
- provide protective clothing, where required and appropriate warning signs;
- report specific accidents, injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences to the appropriate authorities; and
- maintain records of accidents and injuries as appropriate.

Employees' Rights & Responsibilities

The law establishes significant rights for employees – as well as responsibilities to co-operate in appropriate behaviour to protect their own well-being.

The right of employees to work in a safe and healthy environment is enshrined in law. As such, it cannot be withdrawn or diluted by your employer. The most important rights and responsibilities are set out below.

Your Rights

- to have any risks to your health and safety properly controlled, as far as possible;
- to be provided, free of charge, with any personal protective and safety equipment;
- to stop work and leave your work area, if you have reasonable concerns about your safety, without being disciplined;
- to tell your employer about any concerns about your health and safety at work;
- to get in touch with the appropriate authority, without being disciplined, if your employer refuses to address to your concerns;
- to be consulted by your employer about safety, health and welfare at work and to be provided with specific information on these issues; and
- to select Safety Representatives, as part of this consultation with your employer.

Your responsibilities

- to take reasonable care of your health and safety;
- to take reasonable care not to put other people at risk;
 - to participate in appropriate training;
 - to adhere to the employer's health and safety policies;
 - to make proper use of any personal protective equipment;
 - to report any injuries, strains or illnesses you may have suffered as a result of your work; and
 - to tell your employer of any health-related issue that may affect your work performance (for example, becoming pregnant, taking prescribed medication or suffering an injury) so that the employer can make appropriate adjustments in your working arrangements.



Common Workplace Problems

Space

Every room where people work should have sufficient floor area, height and unoccupied space for purposes of health, safety and welfare. While additional accommodation may be necessary if there is a need for wheelchair access, generally in offices 4.65 square metres is the minimum amount of floor space required for each person working in a room (This includes the area occupied by an office desk and chair but excludes filing cabinets and other office furniture).

Temperature

The regulations do not specify a maximum temperature but, as a guide, a minimum comfortable working temperature for indoor sedentary workers is reckoned to be 16° Centigrade within one hour from the start of work with the maximum comfortable working temperature at 27° Centigrade (when undertaking light duties).

Ventilation

Workplaces need to be adequately ventilated. Windows or other openings may provide sufficient ventilation but, where air conditioning is provided, this should be regularly maintained.

Natural light

Lighting should be sufficient to enable people to work and move about safely. If necessary, local lighting should be provided at individual workstations and at places of particular risk such as corridors and stairs. Lighting and light fittings should not create any hazard. Automatic emergency lighting, powered by an independent source, should be provided where sudden loss of light would create a risk.

Workstations and breaks away from the screen

Employers must plan work at visual display units (VDUs) so that it is interrupted periodically by breaks or changes in activities to reduce exposure to the VDU. Although regulations do not specify the length or frequency of breaks, no single continuous period of work at a screen should not exceed one hour. If you use a VDU as a significant part of your daily work, you have a right to seek appropriate eye tests which must be made available and paid for by your employer.

Manual handling

Where manual handling is required, clear guidelines should be followed. For details, see the websites of the Republic's Health and Safety Authority – hsa.ie – or the UK's Health and Safety Executive – hse.co.uk.



Fire

Every workplace must have clear evacuation procedures in place and carry out regular fire drills to ensure employees are aware of the procedures.

Slips, trips and falls

The main causes of slips, trips and falls in the workplace are:

- uneven floor surfaces;
- unsuitable floor coverings;
- wet floors;
- changes in levels;
- trailing cables;
- poor lighting; and
- poor housekeeping.

If you fall, seek medical assistance if required; notify your employer about the incident; ensure a report is filed if necessary; and demand that the hazard is removed.

Work-Related Stress

Workplace stress occurs when the demands of the job and/or the working environment exceeds a worker's capacity to meet them. The symptoms of stress may be physical, mental and/or behavioural. You should familiarise yourself with your employer's policy on stress.

Bullying and Harassment

Bullying in the workplace is a health and safety issue. It can lead to health problems and give rise to further safety issues. It is also an industrial relations matter – and may have legal consequences.

Employers have a duty of care to all employees, to ensure they are both mentally and physically safe at work and that their health is not adversely affected by anything or anyone in the working environment.

This duty of care means employers must behave and respond reasonably in such matters. *(For further information please see the IBOA Guide to Bullying and Harassment in the workplace)*

Please Note:

The information outlined in this document is intended for guidance only – and should not be regarded as a definitive legal statement.

Sources of information

Useful sources of information on health and safety are:

- www.iboa.ie/services/safety.html
- www.iboa.org.uk/services/safety.html
- www.hsa.ie
- www.hse.gov.uk
- www.iboa.ie/knowyourrights/
- www.iboa.org.uk/knowyourrights/

How to raise concerns about health and safety

If you are concerned about a specific health and safety issue at work, please contact your Safety Representative or your local IBOA Rep. If your interest is more general, please contact the Union's Sub-Committee on Safety, Health, Welfare and Security in IBOA House by phoning 01-4755908 from the Republic of Ireland or 2890-200130 from Northern Ireland and Great Britain or by e-mailing safety@iboa.ie