



Thorin Smith at Oak-Way Woodworks Inc. in Richmond, B.C., uses a table saw with proper guarding.

Using safeguards could save your skin

By Lynn Welburn

Working with table saws and panel saws is risky under any circumstances. Saws are by far the most common piece of equipment involved in serious worker injury, and every year more than 40 people in B.C. suffer amputations. Workers should know that even a second without a safeguard in place can have disastrous results.

One of the biggest dangers in working with table saws is removing the guards in the hopes of increasing efficiency. For WorkSafeBC industry specialist Phillip Vernon, the risk isn't worth the reward.

"Blades are nasty things generally and, when rotating at high speed, combined with moving equipment like conveyors, well, I have seen some very, very nasty things," says Vernon. "Many times the cause is that the guard isn't appropriate to the task or it's been removed

because some people feel guards just get in the way of the job."

Barry Nakahara, WorkSafeBC Prevention Field Services manager, agrees and says that on some cheaper equipment, the guards may not be well designed and so are removed by workers seeking speed and efficiency. But if poorly designed equipment is reducing efficiency, workers should take it up with their employer, rather than removing the guard and putting themselves at risk.

While you might get away with working without a guard for awhile, it takes only a moment of inattention for disaster to strike. When a hand or finger meets a metal blade whirling at more than 200 km/h, the results are predictably tragic.

"Almost everyone in the industry knows someone who has had a serious injury with a table saw," Nakahara says. "It's a pretty common thing."

WorkSafeBC statistics show that from 2001 to 2005, there were 208 amputations and 1,048 serious cut and laceration injuries in the industry.

As a worker, you need to be fully trained in safeguarding and safe operation to prevent a serious injury. The following tips should be covered in your safety training:

- 1 Keep hands a safe distance from blades. Accidents can occur when stock moves or hands slip, so use a push stick where possible. Customize push sticks for various applications. Keep your hands as far away from the blade as possible while maintaining control of the stock.
- 2 Make sure the stock is properly supported. Your outfeed table must be long enough to support long stock during cutting. If there's no outfeed table, get help so you don't have to reach over the blade to retrieve stock or waste pieces.
- 3 When the stock gets jammed, stop the blade and wait for it to completely stop moving, then clear away the jammed stock.
- 4 Maintain and adjust guards for safe usage. If there is excess clearance between the guard and top of the stock, adjust the guard to make certain it effectively covers the blade.
- 5 Avoid kickback injuries by always having an adequate guard in place and by using a sharp blade of the right size and type. Kickback injuries are most common when ripping solid wood, cutting poor-quality lumber, and when not using a splitter or anti-kickback device for ripping.

Both Nakahara and Vernon believe that WorkSafeBC strategies in recent years, including increased safety inspections and getting more safety information out to workers, may be helping.

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—Barry Nakahara, WorkSafeBC manager
Prevention Field Services

“I believe we may be seeing a trend in the right direction,” Vernon says, adding it’s a bit early yet to say for certain, but “I think the trend is positive.”

For more information

Our website has several resources that can be easily found by entering “table saws” into our search field on worksafebc.com. These resources include:

- A safeguarding table and panel saws checklist for employers and supervisors, a crew talk for employers and supervisors, and a crew handout for workers
- The *Guarding for Woodworking* safety slide show
- The *Health and Safety for Small- and Medium-sized Woodworking Shops* booklet
- The *Safeguarding Machinery and Equipment: General Requirements* booklet and *Safeguarding Checklist*
- The StartSafe safety series, a series of seven posters focusing on some of the most common accidents and injuries that can result from working in the woodworking industry 📄

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