

Hidden Hazards in the Workplace

A Young Worker's Guide



As a young worker, you may not be aware of the different hazards you could encounter on the job. But knowing what they are, when you might encounter them, and how to protect yourself is powerful knowledge — **and it could save your life.**

**Hidden
hazards at your
workplace**



For a supermarket clerk:

Bacteria and viruses

Chemicals

Sometimes workplace hazards can be obvious, like a broken ladder or water on the floor. But some hazards are less evident — or even invisible. Understanding these hazards and how to avoid exposure to them will ensure you stay healthy and safe throughout your working career.

Depending on the kind of work you do, you may be exposed to different unseen dangers. Here are some examples of common jobs and some of the most significant exposure risks associated with them:

	Asbestos	Bacteria and viruses	Chemicals	Lead	Noise	Pesticides	Silica dust
Construction worker	X	X	X	X	X		X
Cleaner or janitor		X	X	X	X		
Health or child care worker		X	X		X		
Farm or greenhouse worker		X	X		X	X	
Kitchen helper		X	X		X		
Manufacturing worker		X	X	X	X		
Office worker		X	X				
Recreation centre or swimming pool worker		X	X		X		
Restaurant server		X	X		X		
Supermarket clerk		X	X				

Hidden hazard: Excessive noise

Although noise-induced hearing loss usually happens gradually, the damage is permanent. Noise isn't just a problem for those working on construction sites or around heavy machinery. Even environments such as loud restaurants, bars, and recreation centres can damage your hearing.

Hearing loss can happen when you're exposed to noise louder than 85 decibels. It's painless so you may not realize something is wrong until it's too late.

A simple way to test if your environment is too noisy is by talking to someone who's standing an arm's length from you. If you need to raise your voice for that person to hear you, you're probably being exposed to hazardous levels of noise. For example, imagine you're working in a kitchen and your co-worker next to you can't hear you over the sound of the blender. If you're exposed to this every day then that could cause problems for your hearing.

Remember that it's your employer's responsibility to reduce workplace noise. The best way to do this is for your employer to change the design of your workplace, such as by installing sound-absorbent materials on walls or ceilings near noisy machinery. Another way your employer can reduce exposure is through job rotation so you spend less time in noisy areas.

Until the work environment can be changed to safely reduce noise levels, your employer has to provide you with appropriate hearing protection — at no cost to you.

When it comes to hearing protection, keep the following things in mind:

- Ensure you receive hearing protection from your employer and wear it when required.
- Be sure you're protected for the entire time you're exposed to noise. This means wearing hearing protection before you enter a noisy area and only removing it once you're away from the noise.
- If earplugs are your hearing protection, ensure they are a proper fit and are inserted correctly. Remember that one size doesn't fit all.
- **Earbuds (headphones) are not work equipment** and don't provide hearing protection. Listening to music on your phone or other portable devices while working can put you at risk. These devices can distract you from other important sounds, such as approaching machinery, alarms, or warnings from other workers.



Did you know?

About 15 percent of people who work around noise have noise-induced hearing loss.

Hidden hazard: Exposure to asbestos

Inhaling asbestos fibres may damage your lungs and cause serious health problems such as asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. It can take 20 to 30 years for people exposed to asbestos to see the health effects.

You're most at risk of being exposed to asbestos if you're involved in construction, demolition, or renovation work — especially if the building you're working on was built before 1990. Asbestos can also be found in other workplaces and in all kinds of building materials, including roof shingles, vinyl flooring, and stucco. Remember that disturbing any asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) could put you and others at risk of exposure.

Your employer is required to take precautions to protect you from asbestos exposure. This includes having a qualified professional identify any ACMs before work begins and ensuring that all hazardous materials are safely contained and removed. Your employer is also required to provide you with proper training, safe work procedures, and safety equipment.



Latency period of 20 to 30 years

Exposed to
asbestos at
age 19



Signs of
asbestos-related
disease at age 40+

Other hidden hazards: Working with hazardous products and chemicals

If your job requires you to use or work around hazardous products, make sure you know how to safely use the products:

- Carefully read labels on chemicals.
- Store chemicals properly after use.
- Follow safe work procedures and use all protective equipment recommended by the manufacturer and specified by your employer. If you believe you haven't received the right training or equipment, ask your supervisor for it.



Catch hidden hazards

Hazards aren't always easy to recognize. Your employer can help you identify the ones in your job and show you how to stay safe.

These real incidents describe how young workers were exposed to unseen danger:



“A cleaning crew was applying a floor finish in a work area next to where I was processing electronic product orders. I noticed that I started to experience an irritation in my throat and had difficulty breathing and felt nauseous due to the chemicals used on the floor.”



“A propane-fuelled forklift was left idling for a few hours in a warehouse where I was working. I got a bad headache and felt really nauseous and my vision got blurry from exposure to carbon monoxide from the engine's exhaust.”



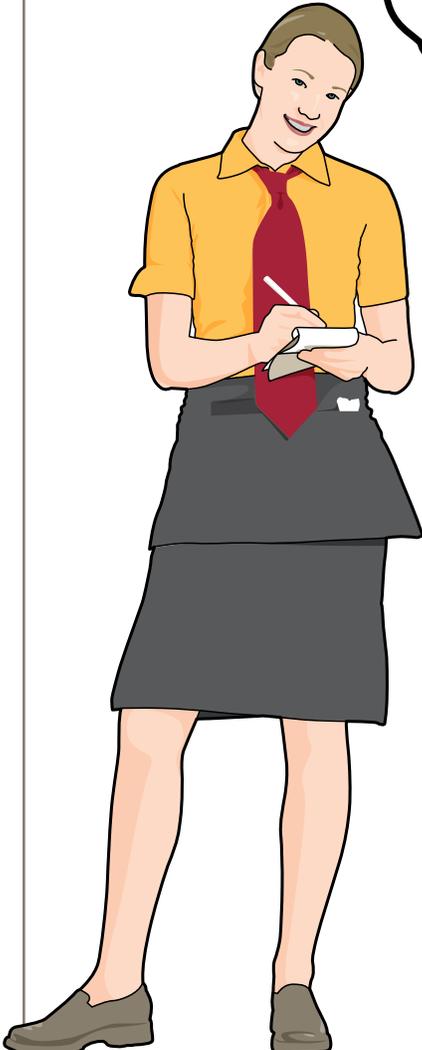
“I worked at a restaurant and a bleach-based drain cleaner was used to clear a urinal after an acid-based drain cleaner had been used in the same line. The chemical reaction resulted in the release of a hazardous air contaminant. I was exposed to the chemicals and had a pain in my chest and was taken to hospital with an upper respiratory irritation.”



“At a physiotherapy pool where I work, a water treatment system that treats the pool water with muriatic acid and liquid chlorine malfunctioned. The chemicals mixed, releasing chlorine gas. I was exposed to the gas and had an irritation in my nose, throat, lungs, and eyes.”

Did you know?

- Sometimes a single exposure to a hazard is enough to cause damage. Other times, small, repeated exposures can accumulate and lead to life-changing conditions.
- People who have occupational diseases today may have been exposed to hazards when they were your age. It's not only older people who need to worry about exposure-related diseases.
- WorkSafeBC inspects workplaces for compliance with the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, but it's up to employers to ensure that all workers have a safe and healthy environment to work in.
- You can't be fired or disciplined if you refuse to do work that is unsafe. If you have a gut feeling that something isn't safe, listen to your instincts and talk to your manager about it.



Your rights and responsibilities

Knowing your rights and responsibilities will help protect you from exposure hazards. All workers in B.C. have three basic health and safety rights:

- 1. The right to know about hazards in the workplace.**
This means receiving training and instruction in safe work practices, emergency procedures, and safety equipment.
- 2. The right to participate in health and safety activities in the workplace.** This includes discussing safety concerns with your supervisor or employer and being involved in your workplace's health and safety committee.
- 3. The right to refuse unsafe work without being punished or fired.**
While it can be intimidating to refuse a task at work, the most important part of any job is getting home safe at the end of the day.

You also have health and safety responsibilities as a worker. These include:

- Knowing and following the health and safety requirements of your workplace.
- Asking for training and clarification if you don't know how to do something safely.

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- Knowing and following the health and safety requirements of your workplace.
- Asking for training and clarification if you don't know how to do something safely.
- Working safely and encouraging your co-workers to do the same.
- Correcting or reporting any unsafe conditions you see, such as spills, loose cords, or defective equipment.
- Immediately reporting any injury to a first aid attendant or your supervisor.



You have the right to be safe at work, so don't be afraid to speak up about workplace safety.

1. **Talk to your supervisor or manager** and explain why you're feeling unsafe. They are required to investigate your concerns and take any necessary steps to correct the situation.
2. If the issue still isn't resolved, **talk to your workplace safety representative**, a safety committee member, or a union steward.
3. If the problem still isn't addressed, you can **contact WorkSafeBC** (anonymously, if you prefer) and explain your safety concerns. A prevention officer can help you find a solution. If the situation calls for it, the officer may inspect your workplace. Call 604.276.3100 in the Lower Mainland or toll-free at 1.888.621.7233.

Learn more

Find more information about unseen dangers on our website. The following are some good resources to start with; search for them by name on [worksafebc.com](https://www.worksafebc.com):

Getting a Job? Ask Questions About Safety

This brochure offers useful tips on how to address concerns about safety in your workplace.

Listen to Your Gut

This website provides tips for improving health and safety on the job, as well as guidance on what to say and do when something doesn't feel safe.

Hear for Good: Preventing Noise Exposure at Work

This pamphlet explains noise-induced hearing loss, noise control, and hearing protection.

When You Use Foam Earplugs...

This handout illustrates how to insert foam earplugs properly.

More questions?

Email yworker@worksafebc.com



Visit worksafebc.com/listentoyourgut