

Identifying and addressing safety hazards

Hazards are all around us at work and home, and the threats can take many different forms. It can be a cord stretched over a walkway, a repetitive process, a worksite that is too cold or a burnt-out lightbulb on an outside path. A hazard can be defined as any existing or potential condition that, by itself or by interacting with other variables, can result in death, injury, property damage or other loss. That's why it is so important for all of us to always be on the lookout. If we can identify hazards early, employers can address them, fix them, and prevent injury and illness.

Working together, we can be one of our best defenses. Hazard reporting is a critical part of our safety program. Whether it's telling your supervisor, maintenance team, safety committee or sharing in a designated reporting system, it's best to report hazards as soon as they are noticed. Don't assume that someone else has seen and reported it already, even if it seems obvious to you. It's better to have multiple reports on the same hazard than none at all.

You are the expert of your job, your workstation, your routines, and tools. If you notice something out of the ordinary, you should feel empowered to say something about it. Also, be sure to avoid the trap of complacency – when you've done something a thousand times it can be difficult to spot a lurking hazard.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF HAZARDS

According to the 9 Elements of a Successful Safety & Health System, hazards can be categorized into 4 different types:

- **Chemical:** For instance, inhaling, ingesting, or having your skin come into contact with some kind of chemical substance
- **Physical:** This could be slipping or falling, being struck by or against something, being exposed to fire or electrical hazards
- **Biological:** For example, being exposed to bloodborne pathogens, molds, wastewater, plant, or insect poisons
- **Ergonomic:** This could be working in an awkward posture, repetitive work, forceful exertions, or workstation design.

The 9 Elements also shares some common hazards to watch out for:

- **Overall Environment:** lighting, noise, temperature, and humidity

- **Workstation Design:** control and display design, location and orientation of work surfaces, chair design, task/job design
- **Movement and Repetitions:** force, vibration, postural demands, physical demands, work pace, tool design, size and shape of work objects, weight of work equipment and objects
- **Machinery and Equipment Design:** Movement required to operate, force required to operate, vibration, postural demands and pace required to keep up with equipment.

Don't forget to also look to your own body condition for possible hazards. For instance, not getting the proper rest or feeling a new pain can be the first sign that something is wrong. Even medications you are taking can pose hazards, especially if they make you drowsy.

If an incident or near miss occurs in your workplace, be sure to participate in the incident investigation process. This allows the safety team to identify the root causes and is a great way to find all of the potential hazards that may have contributed. Getting down to this level of detail also helps the safety team figure out the best way to stop the hazards from occurring again – preventing future injury and illness.

HOW TO CONTROL HAZARDS

- Engineer hazards out, or completely change the process or the environment to eliminate the hazard. Or substitute the hazard by replacing it with a safe alternative.
- Apply administrative controls, where you use policies or procedures to prevent exposure to hazards. This might include having a system to properly handle chemicals or having worker rotation on a repetitive project.
- Use appropriate personal protective equipment, such as wearing gloves or eye wear to create a barrier between you and the hazard. Be sure to comply with all of your known safety procedures and speak up if you have an alternative solution that could make your work safer. Watch out for hazards at home. The same types of hazards that occur at work can also occur at home. Help give your loved ones the tools to identify hazards. You can consider yourself the safety manager of your home. Have your loved ones come to you with safety issues so they can be fixed before someone gets hurt. Hazards will always be out there, but if we recognize them and address them, we can keep each other safe.