

Health and Safety in the cleaning industry

Cleaning is carried out in all industry groups and all workplaces. The cleaning industry is one of the most dynamic sectors representing one of the largest services to businesses. Like every job, there are hazards and risks present. Signs of health and safety problems:

- ▲ an increase in sickness absence
- ▲ reports of pain and discomfort from cleaners
- ▲ reports from safety representatives
- ▲ low motivation and dissatisfaction among cleaners – not wanting to do certain tasks

Employers need to carry out risk assessments. Factors to consider should include: **Wet floors, Spillages, Floor in poor condition and Trip hazards.**

Having identified the risks, next decide how to control them and put these control measures in place. You will be protecting your workers, and complying with the law. The law does not expect you to eliminate all risks, but requires you to protect people 'as far as reasonably practicable'.

Employers must pay for anything that needs to be provided for reasons of safety: gloves, masks, shoes, overalls, training, equipment. [Health & Safety at Work etc Act 1974 section 9]

Some of the problems cleaners face in the workplace:

- ▲ Exposure to dangerous substances, including biological agents that can lead to asthma, allergies, and blood borne infections
- ▲ Noise and vibration
- ▲ Slips, trips, and falls
- ▲ Electrical hazards from work equipment
- ▲ Risks of musculoskeletal disorders
- ▲ Lone working, work-related stress, violence, and bullying
- ▲ Irregular working time and patterns

Slips and trips

The single most common cause of major injury in UK workplaces, cleaning can create slip and trip hazards by smooth floors left damp and slippery or trailing wires from a vacuum or buffing machine. A good management system helps identify problem areas, decide what to do, act on the decisions made and check that the steps have been effective.

Good communication is important to ensure messages are effective and the right action is taken, e.g. between equipment and chemical suppliers to ensure suitability of a product for the type of contaminant and floor.

Effective training and supervision is necessary to ensure cleaning is undertaken to the correct standard. Cleaners need to be informed of their duties and why the cleaning needs to be undertaken in a particular way or at a particular time. Lack of understanding can lead to inappropriate shortcuts.

Action points

- ▲ use the correct amount of the right cleaning product
- ▲ allow detergents enough time to work on greasy floors
- ▲ maintain cleaning equipment so it remains effective
- ▲ use a dry mop on wet floors to reduce floor-drying time
- ▲ spot clean where possible
- ▲ put up a "wet floor" sign. Stop pedestrian access to smooth wet floors by using barriers, locking doors, or cleaning in sections. Signs and cones only warn of a hazard, they do not prevent people from entering the area. If the spill is not visible, they are usually ignored.

Occupational dermatitis

Work-related contact dermatitis is a skin disease caused by work. Often called eczema it develops when the skin is damaged. This leads to redness,

itching, swelling, blistering, flaking and cracking. Hands, followed by the forearms and face are the most susceptible. It can be severe enough to keep you off work or even force you to change jobs. Employers must assess the risks of dermatitis for cleaning workers. Where there is a risk, they must provide adequate control measures, information, instruction and training. Preventing dermatitis:

- ▲ Avoid contact with cleaning products, food and water where possible
- ▲ Protect your skin. Where you can, wear gloves when working with substances that can cause dermatitis and moisturise your hands to replenish the skin's natural oils.
- ▲ Check your hands regularly for the early stages of dermatitis, i.e. itchy, dry or red skin. These symptoms should be reported to a supervisor or manager, as treatment is much more effective if dermatitis is caught early.

Action points

Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Regulations 2002 (as amended) requires employers to:

- ▲ **assess** the risks from hazardous substances. This will include any arrangements to deal with accidents, incidents or emergencies, such as those resulting from serious spillages. The assessment must include the health and safety risks arising from storage, handling or disposal of any of the substances
- ▲ **prevent**, or if this is not reasonably practicable, control exposure to such substances
- ▲ provide staff with **information, instruction and training** about the risks, steps and precautions the employer has taken to control these risks, e.g. provision of appropriate rubber gloves or appropriate eye protection

Back pain

The main causes of aches, pains and discomfort in cleaners are:

- ▲ manual handling – lifting, pulling, push/pull, carrying and holding loads. This can include heavy equipment and items such as polishers, vacuums, ladders, furniture and laundry
- ▲ awkward postures – reaching, stretching, crouching, and kneeling.
- ▲ work organisation – high-work speed, time pressures, poor training and often little consideration on how cleaning can be done
- ▲ using vibrating equipment – equipment can be heavy and requires forceful exertion, it can also be poorly maintained and less well designed

When there is a problem

Signs of musculoskeletal problems in the workplace can include:

- ▲ cleaners adapting their own equipment
- ▲ cleaners wearing splints, bandages or back supports

Action points

- ▲ Involving staff is key to success
- ▲ Training staff in proper lifting techniques, use of handling aids and raising awareness of the risks will reduce the likelihood of injuries in the future
- ▲ Manual handling activities should be avoided if it is reasonably practicable.

Early detection and reporting of aches and pains is crucial. An assessment of the risk of musculoskeletal problems in cleaners should take account of:

- ▲ all cleaning tasks

- ▲ the individual capacity of the cleaner
- ▲ the loads involved
- ▲ the work environment

Work at height

Many accidents in the cleaning industry happen while working on stepladders, overstretching from ladders when window cleaning, standing on benches or chairs to clean high surfaces. The Work at Height Regulations 2005 (as amended) place duties on employers, the self-employed, and any person that controls the work of others, to ensure:

- ▲ all work at height is properly planned and organised
- ▲ those involved in work at height are competent
- ▲ the risks from falls and work at height are assessed and appropriate work equipment is selected and used
- ▲ the risks from fragile surfaces are properly controlled and
- ▲ equipment for work at height is properly inspected and maintained.

The simple hierarchy of preventive measures:

- ▲ avoid work at height where possible
- ▲ use work equipment or other measures to prevent falls
- ▲ if risk of falls cannot be eliminated, use work equipment or other measures to minimise the distance and consequences of a fall.

Action points

- ▲ Make sure the workers have the right skills, experience and training to use the equipment safely and have been consulted about the right equipment to use.
- ▲ Take frequent breaks, especially when working from a ladder - do not work from a ladder for longer than 30 minutes at a time

- ▲ If you have to use a ladder make sure you re-position it before you clean another window, to reduce the risk of an accident from over-reaching.
- ▲ If you use a ladder keep three points of contact wherever possible.
- ▲ If you are hiring access equipment, make sure you know how to install and dismantle it safely – ask the hirer for instructions or assistance if you need them

Preventing harm to cleaning workers requires changes not only in cleaning companies, but also in our perception of cleaning, and how we obtain cleaning services. Changing employment patterns, such as moving from night to daytime cleaning, better procurement, taking into account value rather than price, and better liaison between the client and the cleaning company can reduce the risk of harm to cleaning workers.

- ▲ **For more information on cleaning while working from height, please visit the HSE or use this link - <http://www.hse.gov.uk/cleaning/topics/window-cleaning.htm>**

London Hazards Centre Training

Our free training workshops with cleaning workers from Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe, have looked at basic hazards in the sector and the rights of workers to information, instruction and training in their own languages. Our workshops have had interpreters or been incorporated into ESOL classes. Our bid to Trust for London is for funding to help us continue with this training.

- ▲ **If you are able to sponsor this work or to pay for individual workshops, please get in touch with the Centre at: mail@lhc.org.uk.**

Factsheets online www.lhc.org.uk London advice 020 7794 5999



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