

Occupational Hazards for Hospital Workers

A great variety of jobs are performed in health care facilities. Workers in these settings can face many hazards. It is important for you to determine which hazards affect you and what can be done to prevent illness and injuries. It is the responsibility of the employer along with the Workplace Health and Safety Committee to have a written, proactive health and safety plan that includes an effective way to hear and respond to the concerns of front line workers.

What you should know about . . .	What can your employer do?	What can you do?
<p>Infectious Diseases Infectious diseases can be caused by coming into contact with bacteria, viruses, funguses or parasites when handling patients, contaminated objects, body secretions, tissue or fluids.</p> <p>Hepatitis B, Hepatitis C and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) can be spread by infected blood and body fluids when they come into direct contact with broken, scraped, chapped or inflamed skin or when skin is punctured by a sharp object such as a needle.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide a written “Routine Practices” document that is easily accessible • ensure availability of gloves and other protective equipment and cleansing agents • establish a sharps program • establish an immunization program for all workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wash hands frequently (proper handwashing is the best way to prevent communicable diseases) • follow “Routine Practices” at all times for all patients • check with your Occupational Health Nurse regarding immunizations
<p>Back injuries Back injuries are the most frequent injury in hospitals. Heavy lifting and frequent bending or twisting when moving objects or patients increases the risk of back injury.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide accessible mechanical lifts (ceiling lifts preferred) • ensure all staff are trained to use mechanical lifts • train staff on proper lifting techniques 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use available lifts • get help to lift if mechanical device is not appropriate or not available • use proper lifting technique
<p>Repetitive Strain Injuries A repetitive strain injury (RSI) is an injury that occurs over time as a result of repetitive, forceful or awkward body movements. The injury usually affects the wrist, hand, shoulder, elbow, back, knee or ankle. It can cause pain, weakness, numbness or difficulty in grasping objects.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide ergonomically correct tools and equipment • allow staff control over how they organize their work day • promote rest breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • organize your work day so repetitive tasks are done for short periods throughout the day • take regular breaks
<p>Shiftwork Changing shifts and working at night disrupts your body’s natural rhythms. It can contribute to digestion problems, heart disease, and sleep problems. It also makes participation in social activities and family life difficult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • avoid a permanent night shift • limit the number of nights worked in a row • avoid an early start for morning shifts • give as many weekends off as possible with at least two days off in a row • keep schedules regular and give workers plenty of notice of the schedules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ask your doctor’s advice before becoming a shift worker if you have diabetes, asthma, epilepsy or mental health problems • improve your sleep by practising a regular bedtime ritual and avoid caffeine, smoking and sleeping pills.
<p>Violence Health care workers are at risk from violence when dealing with angry and stressed patients and their families.</p> <p>Workplace violence can result in loss of sleep, fear or depression, post traumatic stress disorder, and sometimes even death. It is, therefore, very important for workplaces to develop strategies to prevent violence.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acknowledge that violence is an issue • work with the Health & Safety Committee to identify risks and develop solutions • post visible signs reminding all that this is a respectful workplace • train staff on diffusing situations and intervention procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follow policies and intervention guidelines • report incidents to your health and safety representative and/or committee.

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<p>Radiation Radiation is used in diagnostic procedures such as x-ray, fluoroscopy and angiography. It is also used in treatments using radioactive material. Other forms of radiation are used in microwaves, magnetic fields and lasers.</p> <p>Long term and repeated exposure to radiation can cause genetic damage and reproductive health problems. Light beams from lasers can harm the eyes and skin.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • provide personal protective equipment (PPE) such as shield aprons and safety glasses • establish procedures for use of diagnostic equipment and PPE • minimize exposure time to radiation • ensure warning signs are posted where appropriate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • follow procedures and use PPE • take all safety concerns to your health and safety representative and/or committee
<p>Chemicals Chemicals found in hospitals can be in the form of dusts, vapours, gases or liquids. A chemical can enter your body in three main ways</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ it can be breathed in ✓ it can go through your skin ✓ it can be swallowed <p>Many chemicals can cause serious illness and in some cases, death. Often the effects are not noticeable right away.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work closely with the workplace health & safety committee to identify chemicals used and find out what health effects they may have • maintain all MSDS (material safety data sheets) • eliminate toxic chemicals or substitute with less toxic alternatives when possible. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • take concerns to your workplace health & safety representative and/or committee • read labels of all chemicals used and if more information is required, go to the MSDS
<p>Noise High levels of noise are often found in hospital kitchens, laundries and boiler rooms. Long term exposure to high levels of noise (more than 80 decibels) can cause permanent hearing loss.</p> <p>Noise can distract workers and make it difficult to communicate and concentrate.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • isolate noisy machines in a room where workers seldom need to be • use noise dampeners • maintain equipment in good working order • provide hearing protection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • report any equipment malfunction as soon as possible • wear hearing protection • have hearing checked regularly

If you need more information contact the

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Also see our fact sheets on

Low Back Pain in Workers
How Workplace Chemicals Can Harm You
Carpal Tunnel Syndrome
Ergonomics
Working in Heat
Lifting Safely
Occupational Noise and Hearing Loss
Repetitive Strain Injury
Building a Respectful Workplace
Shiftwork
Stress at Work
Violence at Work
Hazards of Poor Work Organization

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