

WORK-RELATED HEALTH

What are work-related health risks?

Health and safety is about more than just preventing injury. Work can also create risks of both immediate and longer-term harm to workers' physical and mental health.

Businesses need to manage risks to health created by work (e.g. ensuring working with chemicals doesn't lead to ill-health), and the impact of outside factors that could affect a worker's ability to be safe at work (e.g. fatigue issues).

The effects of work on health, and health on work, are interrelated. A worker regularly exposed to noise at work may develop hearing loss, which impairs their ability to hear instructions, leading to a potential injury.

The effects of work on health

There are 5 key sources of work-related health risks:

Physical – e.g. exposure to workplace noise may lead to hearing loss

Chemical – e.g. exposure to solvents may lead to cancer or asthma or inhalation of asbestos fibres may lead to lung cancer

Biological – e.g. exposure to animal bacteria may lead to sudden and severe illnesses e.g. leptospirosis

Ergonomic - e.g. repeated lifting of heavy or bulky items may lead to lower back pain.

Psychosocial – e.g. bullying or harassment at work may lead to work-related stress or depression; stress at work can lead to physical harm such as fatigue or heart disease.

The effects of health on work

There are 4 key types of health-related safety risks:

Impairment – e.g. fatigue may lead to reduced concentration

Incapacity – e.g. an unknown or poorly controlled heart condition may lead to a worker suddenly losing consciousness while involved in a safety-critical task

Sensory - e.g. damage to a worker's hearing may prevent them from correctly or quickly identifying and reacting to a workplace risk

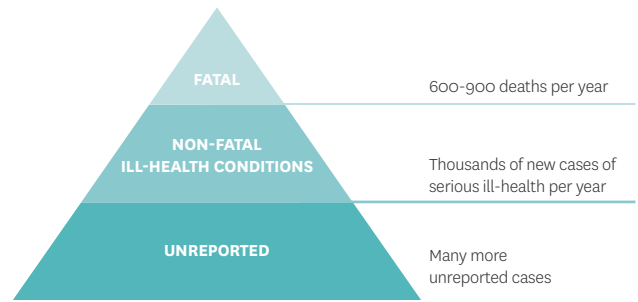
Mobility - e.g. physical frailty may prevent a worker from moving out of the way of an oncoming vehicle

How can I use the Strategy?

CHECK OUT THE PRIORITY AREAS IN THE STRATEGY BELOW FOR ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO ENSURE FEWER PEOPLE EXPERIENCE WORK-RELATED ILL-HEALTH

Better management of work-related health, including physical and mental health

Too many people in New Zealand die or suffer from work-related ill-health and disease in New Zealand. Estimates show 600 to 900 people in New Zealand die each year from work-related diseases.

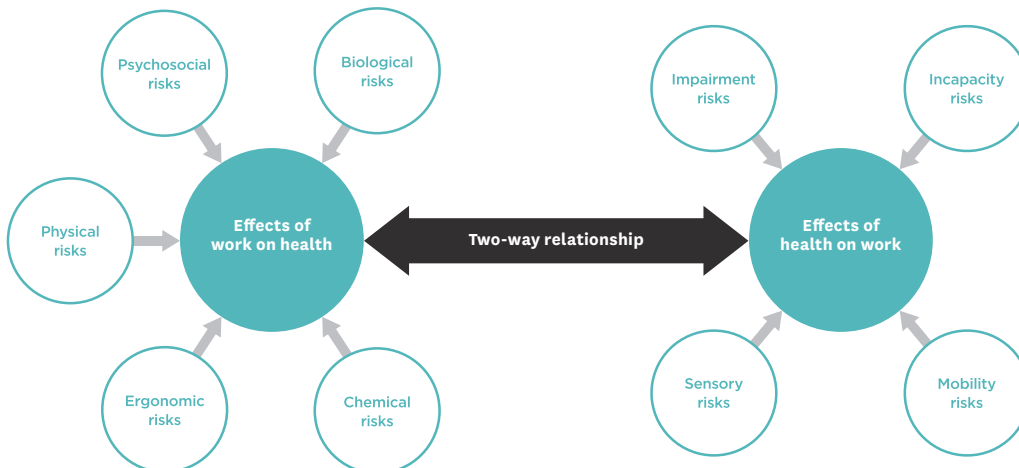


How does mental health fit in?

Businesses need to make sure that workers aren't harmed by work including harm to their mental health from psychosocial work factors, such as stress, fatigue, bullying and harassment.

Good, meaningful work is good for mental health, while precarious and poor working conditions can negatively affect mental health.

Many businesses also recognise the benefits of supporting the general health and wellbeing of their workers, above and beyond the obligations to ensure the work of the business doesn't harm their workers.





Businesses with greater need: sectors with highest harm and small businesses

Sectors with highest harm from injuries may tend to focus on the immediate safety risks at the expense of thinking about the work-related health risks that arise in their work. Both large and small businesses face challenges in addressing the more complex work-related health risks, particularly those that have long latency between exposure and the onset of ill-health.



Key health risks in sectors with high harm rates

Exposures that cause the most deaths and ill-health in construction, manufacturing and primary industries:

Airborne hazards
Animal-transmitted bacteria
Manual handling
Noise
Shift work/fatigue
Sun exposure
Work stress (high job demand/low job control).

Airborne hazards account for the greatest number of deaths in all three sectors. They include agri-chemicals, asbestos, benzene, chromium vi, diesel engine exhaust, nickel, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH), second-hand smoke, silica dust, welding fumes, wood dust.



Workers with greater need: Māori and other workers at greatest risk

Māori workers are often over-represented in more hazardous jobs. Research on work-related exposures and risk factors for work-related disease suggests that there are differences in work-related exposures between Māori and non-Māori populations and this is at least in part contributing to health inequities.



Encourage leaders at all levels to integrate health with safety

Strong leadership across the system is needed to ensure significant change in how work-related health risks are addressed. Leaders need to integrate work-related health into their overall direction, resourcing decisions and in the way they do business to ensure that health is given as much focus as safety. This means taking a longer perspective – recognising the long latency between exposure and the onset of ill-health for many health risks.



Lift capability of health and safety professionals

Specialist advice and support is a key way of ensuring businesses and workers have the capability to know what healthy work looks like. Specialists can bring their expert knowledge and skills to assist businesses to manage their risks.

Occupational health specialists include: occupational hygienists, occupational therapists, occupational doctors, occupational health nurses, physiotherapists, ergonomists, safety systems experts, hazardous substances professionals, and maintenance engineers.



Enable workers to engage, be represented and to participate

A genuine commitment to involve workers will be critical to creating healthier workplaces because it can be harder to spot the risks that may lead to long term health issues.

Managing health at work is more effective if workers are involved with developing and carrying out the solutions. Workers and their reps need to be trained and supported to understand the health risks at their work and empowered to raise them, for example worker representatives ensuring that health is always on the agenda for discussion.



Develop and share better data and insights to improve decision making

Quality data is a priority in the Strategy because it is crucial to understand health risks and harms. Long term planning will assist employers, managers and workers to understand and manage work related health risks for their business.

Over the next few years government agencies will work together to build New Zealand's capability to measure work-related health.

Measuring and monitoring most work-related diseases can't be done in the same way as injuries because of long latency between exposures and the onset of ill-health.

Where do I go for more help?

WorkSafe information <https://worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/work-related-health/>

This includes guidance on managing risks from fatigue, violence, stress, bullying and harassment, manual handling, airborne contaminants, hazardous substances, noise and more.

You can also find WorkSafe's strategic plan for work-related health here.

Bullying prevention toolbox <https://worksafe.govt.nz/the-toolshed/tools/bullying-prevention-toolbox/>

Creating healthy workplaces <https://wellplace.nz/facts-and-information/what-is-a-healthy-workplace/>

Denison, H., Eng, A., Barnes, L.A. et al. (2018) Inequities in exposure to occupational risk factors between Māori and non-Māori workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Journal of Epidemiology Community Health* 0:1-8 doi:10.1136/jech-2018-210438

www.mbie.govt.nz/health-and-safety-strategy