

Working alone

Health and safety guidance on the risks of lone working



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Introduction

This leaflet provides guidance on how to keep lone workers healthy and safe. It is aimed at anyone who employs or engages lone workers, and also at self-employed people who work alone.

Following the guidance in the leaflet is not compulsory, but it should help employers understand what they need to do to comply with their legal duties towards lone workers under:

- the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974;
- the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

Is it legal to work alone and is it safe?

Working alone is not in itself against the law and it will often be safe to do so. However, the law requires employers to consider carefully, and then deal with, any health and safety risks for people working alone.

Employers are responsible for the health, safety and welfare at work of all their workers. They also have responsibility for the health and safety of any contractors or self-employed people doing work for them.

These responsibilities cannot be transferred to any other person, including those people who work alone.

Workers have responsibilities to take reasonable care of themselves and other people affected by their work activities and to co-operate with their employers in meeting their legal obligations.

Who are lone workers and what jobs do they do?

Lone workers are those who work by themselves without close or direct supervision, for example:

In fixed establishments

- A person working alone in a small workshop, petrol station, kiosk or shop
- People who work from home other than in low-risk, office-type work (separate guidance covers homeworkers doing low-risk work – see the end of the leaflet for details)
- People working alone for long periods, eg in factories, warehouses, leisure centres or fairgrounds
- People working on their own outside normal hours, eg cleaners and security, maintenance or repair staff

As mobile workers working away from their fixed base

- Workers involved in construction, maintenance and repair, plant installation and cleaning work
- Agricultural and forestry workers
- Service workers, including postal staff, social and medical workers, engineers, estate agents, and sales or service representatives visiting domestic and commercial premises

How must employers control the risks?

Employers have a duty to assess risks to lone workers and take steps to avoid or control risks where necessary. This must include:

- involving workers when considering potential risks and measures to control them;
- taking steps to ensure risks are removed where possible, or putting in place control measures, eg carefully selecting work equipment to ensure the worker is able to perform the required tasks in safety;
- instruction, training and supervision;
- reviewing risk assessments periodically or when there has been a significant change in working practice.

This may include:

- being aware that some tasks may be too difficult or dangerous to be carried out by an unaccompanied worker;
- where a lone worker is working at another employer's workplace, informing that other employer of the risks and the required control measures;
- when a risk assessment shows it is not possible for the work to be conducted safely by a lone worker, addressing that risk by making arrangements to provide help or back-up.

Risk assessment should help employers decide on the right level of supervision. There are some high-risk activities where at least one other person may need to be present. Examples include:

- working in a confined space, where a supervisor may need to be present, along with someone dedicated to the rescue role;
- working at or near exposed live electricity conductors;
- working in the health and social care sector dealing with unpredictable client behaviour and situations.

Employers who have five or more employees must record the significant findings of all risk assessments.

Employers also need to be aware of any specific law that prohibits lone working applying in their industry. Examples include supervision in diving operations, vehicles carrying explosives and fumigation work.

Further information about controlling risks can be found on the HSE website at: www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/.

Further sources of information are listed at the end of the leaflet.

What must employers consult on?

By law, employers must consult all their employees on health and safety matters.

Effective consultation will also help ensure that relevant hazards are identified, and appropriate and proportionate control measures are chosen.

You can find more advice on HSE's website:
www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/managing/consulting.htm.

Which particular problems affect lone workers?

Lone workers should not be put at more risk than other employees. Establishing a healthy and safe working environment for lone workers can be different from organising the health and safety of other employees. Some of the issues that need special attention when planning safe working arrangements are set out in the following pages, but your risk assessment process should identify the issues relevant to your circumstances.

Can one person adequately control the risks of the job?

Employers should take account of normal work and foreseeable emergencies, eg fire, equipment failure, illness and accidents. Employers should identify situations where people work alone and consider the following:

- Does the workplace present a specific risk to the lone worker, for example due to temporary access equipment, such as portable ladders or trestles that one person would have difficulty handling?
- Is there a safe way in and out for one person, eg for a lone person working out of hours where the workplace could be locked up?
- Is there machinery involved in the work that one person cannot operate safely?
- Are chemicals or hazardous substances being used that may pose a particular risk to the lone worker?
- Does the work involve lifting objects too large for one person?
- Is there a risk of violence and/or aggression?
- Are there any reasons why the individual might be more vulnerable than others and be particularly at risk if they work alone (for example if they are young, pregnant, disabled or a trainee)?
- If the lone worker's first language is not English, are suitable arrangements in place to ensure clear communications, especially in an emergency?

If a person has a medical condition, are they able to work alone?

Employers should seek medical advice if necessary. Consider both routine work and foreseeable emergencies that may impose additional physical and mental burdens on an individual.

Why is training particularly important for lone workers?

Training is particularly important where there is limited supervision to control, guide and help in uncertain situations.

Training may also be crucial in enabling people to cope in unexpected circumstances and with potential exposure to violence and aggression.

Lone workers are unable to ask more experienced colleagues for help, so extra training may be appropriate. They need to be sufficiently experienced and fully understand the risks and precautions involved in their work and the location that they work in.

Employers should set the limits to what can and cannot be done while working alone. They should ensure workers are competent to deal with the requirements of the job and are able to recognise when to seek advice from elsewhere.

How will the person be supervised?

The extent of supervision required depends on the risks involved and the ability of the lone worker to identify and handle health and safety issues.

The level of supervision needed is a management decision, which should be based on the findings of a risk assessment, ie the higher the risk, the greater the level of supervision required. It should not be left to individuals to decide whether they need assistance.

Where a worker is new to a job, undergoing training, doing a job that presents specific risks, or dealing with new situations, it may be advisable for them to be accompanied when they first take up the post.

Monitoring

Procedures must be put in place to monitor lone workers as effective means of communication are essential. These may include:

- supervisors periodically visiting and observing people working alone;
- pre-agreed intervals of regular contact between the lone worker and supervisor, using phones, radios or email, bearing in mind the worker's understanding of English;
- manually operated or automatic warning devices which trigger if specific signals are not received periodically from the lone worker, eg staff security systems;
- implementing robust system to ensure a lone worker has returned to their base or home once their task is completed.

What happens if a person becomes ill, has an accident, or there is an emergency?

Your assessment of the risks should identify foreseeable events. Emergency procedures should be established and employees trained in them.

Information regarding emergency procedures should be given to lone workers. Your risk assessment may indicate that mobile workers should carry first-aid kits and/or that lone workers need first-aid training. They should also have access to adequate first-aid facilities.

Find out more

Homeworkers: Guidance for employers on health and safety Leaflet INDG226(rev1)
HSE Books 2011 www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg226.pdf

*Manual handling. Manual Handling Operations Regulations 1992 (as amended).
Guidance on Regulations L23* (Third edition) HSE Books 2004
ISBN 978 0 7176 2823 0 www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/books/l23.htm

Violence at work: A guide for employers Leaflet INDG69(rev) HSE Books 1996
www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg69.pdf

Managing work-related violence in licensed and retail premises Leaflet INDG423
HSE Books 2008 www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg423.pdf

Working with substances hazardous to health: A brief guide to COSHH Leaflet
INDG136(rev5) HSE Books 2012 www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg136.htm

Working at height: www.hse.gov.uk/toolbox/height.htm

Other sources of advice: You may be able to get additional information from your trade association or employers' organisation, or from trade unions and some charities, eg the Suzy Lamplugh Trust.

Further information

For information about health and safety, or to report inconsistencies or inaccuracies in this guidance, visit www.hse.gov.uk/. You can view HSE guidance online and order priced publications from the website. HSE priced publications are also available from bookshops.

This guidance is issued by the Health and Safety Executive. Following the guidance is not compulsory, unless specifically stated, and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance.

This leaflet is available at: www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg73.htm.

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