

Preparing for an emergency



Why do I need a workplace emergency plan?

First of all, it makes good sense. When an emergency occurs you won't have time to think about your response in any structured way. If you have taken time beforehand to think about the sorts of things that could go badly wrong in your workplace, and the steps you can take to limit the consequences, you – and your business – will be better off if the worst does happen.

Secondly, you have a moral responsibility to ensure you or your employees are not harmed from a predictable emergency.

Thirdly – and sometimes this is not clearly understood it is a legal requirement – the Health and Safety in Employment (HSE) Act says employers must develop procedures for dealing with emergencies that may arise while employees are at work.

A fourth reason is it has become increasingly clear that government's primary responsibility following a natural disaster or civil defence emergency is to restore basic public services before rendering assistance to the private sector. Direct aid to individual businesses is not on the priority list.

What sorts of emergencies must I prepare for?

That depends on what you do, where you work and whom you employ. Most emergencies are likely to result from extreme weather (flood, blizzard, cyclone), some sort of natural disaster (earthquake, volcanic eruption), an accident (chemical spill, gas emission, vehicle accident), an act of violence (bomb threat, civil disturbance, assault), or an outbreak of illness (bird flu, meningitis). The HSE Act asks you to determine what you need to plan for by weighing up the likelihood of an event happening in your workplace, the amount of harm it is likely to cause, and the availability of measures to deal with it.

No one would be expected to have an emergency plan for a meteor strike, but it is hard to imagine a situation where one for fire would not be needed.

Whether you need a flood management plan will depend on factors specific to your operation – such as whether your premises are on low lying land or close to a body of water, and whether any of your work proc-

esses – or those of neighbouring businesses – involve large quantities of liquid.

Work through the planning process with your staff to make sure you have thought of everything. Remember, if you employ people who work alone, events that might not otherwise give rise to an emergency may have more serious implications for them and may need to be included in the plan.

What should the plan include?

Emergency plans aim to prevent injury and limit the impact of an emergency situation on your workplace and the people in and around it. A plan to deal with a fire, for instance, should consider:

- ways to reduce the risk of fire by keeping flammable substances well away from sources of ignition;
- identification of high risk areas and operations, such as work processes that involve high temperatures;
- installation and monitoring of smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and sprinklers;
- a means of raising the alarm

that can be easily accessed and will be immediately understood by workers and, if necessary, by those in the vicinity of the site;

- regular monitoring to ensure fire exits are well marked and do not become obstructed, and that smoke doors are kept closed to limit the spread of a blaze;
- the appointment and training of fire wardens, first aid providers, etc, and allocation of specific responsibilities, such as evacuation supervision and summoning the fire service;
- evacuation procedures and assembly areas;
- communication – signs, pictograms, induction processes, etc – to ensure all on site, including visitors, cleaners and casual staff, understand what to do in an emergency and whom they should contact (eg, senior staff, specialised emergency personnel, emergency services);
- signage to show emergency services the site layout and location of any hazardous substances, etc;
- drills (at least every six months) and exercises to both

LINKS

Want to know more?

- Samples of emergency management plans and advice on how to prepare them are on the ACC website at www.acc.co.nz. Click on the Injury prevention tab, then on Work safety, select Employers – manage health and safety, then Action in the menu on the left of the page. Click on Emergency readiness.
- A number of documents dealing with different aspects of workplace emergency management are available on the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management website at www.mcdem.govt.nz. Click on Being prepared, then on Businesses.
- A guide to evacuation schemes can be found on the NZ Fire Service site at www.fire.org.nz
- Information on pandemic influenza can be found on the Ministry of Health website www.moh.govt.nz

Get connected!

New Zealand's on-line health & safety community

Safeguard hosts New Zealand's only active email discussion forum on workplace health and safety.

Joining is free and takes only a minute.
Visit www.safeguard.co.nz
and click on Safe-NZ Forum.

familiarise staff with the procedures and to monitor their effectiveness.

Although emergency plans are intended to prevent harm to people, a well-thought out plan will also assist with business continuity during, and after, an emergency.

Is one plan enough?

No. Different types of emergency will require different plans. Most of these plans will have a lot of factors in common – evacuation procedures, summoning help, shutting down hazardous processes, etc – but they will be handled in different ways, depending on whether you are dealing with an earthquake, a flood, a fire, an intruder or a chemical spill. There will also be responses specific to each type of emergency, and to different sites, or work areas.

What do I do with the plan when it is finished?

You will need to make a written record of it, and also put some signs around the workplace to remind staff and visitors what is expected of them in an emergency. In such circumstances electronic records may be inaccessible, so have printed copies of the plan – in highly visible, waterproof covers – in several easily accessible locations.

A good plan will have practical results too. Once you have worked out what the biggest risks are for your workplace, there are likely to be things you need to do, such as stocking up your first aid kit, providing a source of emergency lighting,

purchasing suitable PPE and ensuring you have appropriate materials on hand to contain, neutralise and clean up spilt chemicals. Check these supplies at least annually to ensure that everything is still fresh and in useable condition.

What happens next?

Once the plan is complete it is a good idea to test it. Evacuation drills have their uses, but a simulated emergency, based on a possible incident scenario, have even more benefits. Areas of the workplace – including emergency exits – may be inaccessible, the power may have failed, an injured workmate may need to be evacuated. Get your team of wardens – or even you whole staff – involved in the exercise, then get together afterwards to monitor the results and identify areas of the plan that need improvement.

Wherever possible make sure you are forewarned of real life emergencies. Monitor weather reports if extreme conditions are predicted and remind staff what they should do – which will usually be stay at home until the worst conditions pass.

If an epidemic of disease is forecast (for example, bird flu) check the Ministry of Health website to see how you should be responding, and pass the information on to your employees.

Revise your plan and re-train your wardens every 12 months, and after any real emergencies. Be sure to extend the plan to include any new risks that may have emerged since you last checked it. Involve all your staff in this and keep them informed of any changes that are made. ■

This article is intended to provide only a broad overview of its topic. Our thanks to Simonne Moses and Patrick Seaman of Impac Solutions.



Do your gloves pass the acid test?

Ansell chemsafe™

Knowing which glove for which chemical is a real 'acid test'. There is no 'one glove fits all' and even your best-made most sophisticated glove may not be the right glove. So make certain your gloves are 'chemical safe' at www.ansellchemsafe.com.

Distributed by:
EBOS
GROUP

Freephone:
0800 104 401