

SURVIVAL TIPS

Suggestions to keep you healthy and free of injury

Air quality at work

Pollution is all around us, be it from traffic fumes, smoke from wood fires or cigarette smoke in bars and cafes. But what about the air you breathe at work? We all have the right to clean air and water in our workplaces, but many of them feature poor air quality, substandard ventilation and a low awareness of the health hazards caused by pollution. (The ILO defines pollution as a contaminant - including gases, dusts, fumes, mists and vapours - present at more than a one-third of the level set by the Workplace Exposure Standard, or WES.)

Tip 1: The right to know

Everyone has the right to know what pollutants they are breathing at work. These may be health hazards such as carbon monoxide, diesel fumes, solvents, asbestos, silica, heavy metals etc. Do you suffer from sore throats, red eyes, skin reaction, headaches? If so, it may be pollution, especially if it clears up at the weekend! If you believe that such pollutants are present, ask your supervisor what they are. (Legally, you must be told what chemicals are in your work environment, what impact they may have on your health and what precautions you must take.)

Tip 2: Ask your employer

Your employer must identify all airborne contaminants produced by chemicals, materials, machines or processes that emit toxic fumes. Do you have a haz-

ard register? Does it list health hazards? Where a hazard is likely to exist, your employer is responsible for monitoring and controlling it. Does your workplace have a health monitoring programme? Ask your supervisor.

Tip 3: Ventilation

By law, airborne contaminants must be controlled to not exceed WES exposure limits. Priority must be given to totally removing airborne contaminants from your workplace, by extraction, elimination or substitution to safer chemicals. Better ventilation should be a priority in many workplaces: is yours one of them? Check it out.

Tip 4: Safety Data Sheets [SDS]

A safety data sheet must be available to you for each hazardous substance used in your workplace. It identifies:

- chemicals & hazardous ingredients;
- physical and chemical characteristics;
- WES exposure limits and health hazards;
- special precautions and spill/leak procedures.

Do you have access to safety data sheets? Can you understand them?

Tip 5: Wear respiratory protective equipment [RPE]

You must be supplied with the correct RPE for any task where the WES exposure limit may be exceeded. Your employer must check with your equipment supplier for the specific RPE for specific hazards. Never share RPE

with anyone else and store it in a sealed container when not in use.

Tip 6: Are you competent to use it?

You should not wear RPE unless you have been trained. Training includes fit testing, type of mask/filter required, cleaning, usage, hygiene and replacement intervals. If unsure, do not proceed; ask your supervisor for assistance.

Tip 7: Creating hazards

Before you start any task, ask yourself:

- Am I going to create any unnecessary health hazards by chemical process, welding fume, grinding process or sweeping etc?
- Is there a safe system of work to minimise pollution levels?

Tip 8: Your responsibility

As an employee you must take reasonable care of your own health and safety and of your workmates. You must follow your employer's health and safety instructions and use safety equipment as instructed.

Disclaimer: these survival tips are general in nature and are not intended to be comprehensive. Always take into account your own particular circumstances. If you have any questions, please discuss them with your supervisor.

These survival tips supplied by the New Zealand Safety Council, www.safetycouncil.org.nz or email info@safetycouncil.org.nz