



Safety and health good practice online for the healthcare sector

Approximately 10 % of workers in the European Union are employed in the health and welfare sector, with a significant proportion employed in hospitals. This makes healthcare one of the biggest employment sectors in Europe, covering a vast range of different jobs. Women represent around 77 % of the workforce. According to European data the work-related accident rate in the healthcare sector is 34 % higher than the EU average. In addition the sector has the second highest incidence rate of work-related musculoskeletal disorders (MSD), after construction (1). This fact sheet provides a basic introduction to occupational safety and health in the healthcare sector and how to find information for the sector on the Agency's web site.

The **main risk factors** and related health problems in the healthcare sector are well documented (2). These include the following:

- Musculoskeletal loads — poor working postures, heavy loads.
- Biological agents — micro-organisms, viruses, e.g. HIV and hepatitis B, contaminated blood.
- Chemical substances — including disinfectants, anaesthetic gases and antibiotics. They may be harmful to the skin, or the respiratory system; they may be carcinogenic.
- Radiological hazards.
- Changing shifts, work rhythms and night work.
- Violence from members of the public.
- Other factors contributing to stress — traumatic situations, and factors in the organisation of work and relations with colleagues.
- Accidents at work — falls, cuts, needle punctures, electric shocks, etc.

The 'Topics' section of the web feature contains links on all these issues.

Risk assessment and effective health and safety management are the key to preventing and reducing healthcare-worker exposure to work hazards.

This includes: having in place a health and safety management system; a preventive policy and risk assessment; training; worker consultation; properly-resourced preventive services; and the integration of OSH into other management processes such as purchasing and contract tendering. In particular:

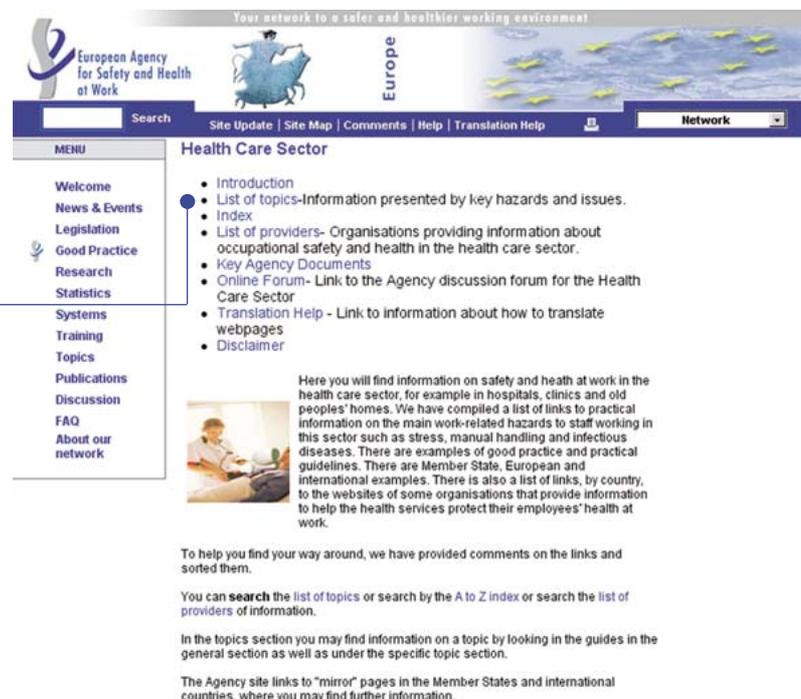
- risks are assessed by looking at all the hazards present and identifying who could be harmed and how, and taking adequate action to prevent the risks, aiming first for prevention at source;
- consulting the workforce and actively involving worker representatives, for example through safety committees, is an important part of successful management.

Go to **'List of Topics'** on the web feature and click on the 'management' section for *links* to more information.

All **occupational groups** in the sector may face hazards — not only nursing staff but also service support staff and trade workers, and a whole range of professionals including laboratory workers and anaesthetists. Click on the 'occupations' section of 'Topics' for occupation specific *links*.

The web feature contains links to a whole range of information. There are quality-evaluated links from Member States and beyond. Major OSH authorities, trade union and employer associations and non-governmental organisations are included.

http://europe.osha.eu.int/good_practice/healthcare/



(1) See Eurostat Statistics in Focus Theme 3, 16/2000 and 17/2001, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg.

(2) For example see 'Working Conditions in Hospitals in the European Union', European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, EF/95/27/EN, ISBN 92-827-5776-5.

Needle injuries: The effects of injuries to staff from used hypodermic needles can be both physical and emotional, as bloodborne viruses such as HIV or hepatitis B or C can be passed on to the staff. Preventive measures include the following:

- Eliminate the use of needles where safe and effective alternatives are available.
- Implement the use of devices with safety features and evaluate their use to determine which are most effective and acceptable.
- Modify work practices that pose a needle injury hazard to make them safer. Avoid recapping needles.
- Train workers in the safe use and disposal of needles in appropriate sharps containers.

Healthcare workers may be at risk of developing **latex allergy** from the protective gloves they wear. The allergic reactions include skin rashes, nasal and sinus and eye problems, asthma and even shock. Prevention measures include the following:

- Use gloves with a low level of extractable latex proteins.
- Limit latex glove-wearing to tasks presenting an infection risk.
- Use powder-free gloves wherever possible.
- Use good hygiene practices such as hand washing and avoid using barrier creams in conjunction with latex gloves.

Work in hospitals, clinics, etc. is covered by all of the **European safety and health at work directives**. Member States have implemented these directives through legislation and additional guidance and codes. A 'framework' directive sets out the basis for good management and covers all the hazards found in the healthcare sector. Other directives cover specific risks in greater detail.



The screenshot shows the website interface for the Health Care Sector. The main content area lists the following topics:

- Biological hazards - includes infections, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, needle injuries, waste disposal
- Biological hazards needle injuries
- Chemicals and materials - includes anaesthetic gases, disinfectants, drug handling, latex allergy
- General - e.g. guides or sub websites covering several topics
- Management - includes legislation, training, prevention committees, accident prevention
- Manual handling, lifting, musculoskeletal disorders, back pain and ergonomics
- Occupations and Workplaces
- Physical agents - includes lasers, radiation
- Programmes, Policies and Statistics - e.g. national or regional campaigns, policy issues etc.
- Safety, Buildings and Equipment
- Stress - includes bullying, harassment, work organisation
- Violence
- Women workers, pregnant workers
- Working hours, shift work and night work

Strenuous lifting, **manual handling and stressful working postures** typically occur when assisting patients. But they are also found in many other tasks such as handling laundry, goods, supplies, etc., pushing trolleys, beds, rubbish containers etc. and cleaning. Stressful working postures may also occur in surgery or laboratory work. Prevention includes considering the following:

- Have jobs been assessed for manual handling and tiring postures?
- Can technical aids or adjustable equipment be used?
- Can the workplace be reorganised to avoid or reduce the problem?
- Is training provided?
- Are health surveillance and rehabilitation services in place?

Paying attention to **heating, lighting and air quality** is as important in healthcare buildings as in any other sector.

Working shifts and nights can cause a number of health problems and add to work stress. Prevention and control measures include the improvement of work schedules, for example:

- Are shifts organised to rotate forward, from day, to evening, to night?
- Is there sufficient time off to allow employees to catch up on sleep deficit after working nights?
- Are there sufficient rest breaks during the shift?
- Are shifts planned and notified to staff well in advance?
- Are unplanned shift changes kept to a minimum?

Psychosocial issues, such as violence by members of the public and bullying by work colleagues and other stress factors, have been shown to be prevalent in healthcare work. Additional stress factors can include confrontation with pain and with dying people, lack of autonomy and monotonous work in some jobs, lack of team working, work in isolation and lack of support and feedback. However, prevention and control are possible.

Better health and safety performance in the healthcare sector will benefit not only workers but also everyone receiving treatment and reduces costs.