

## **Hazards and Risks in the Retail Trade: advice for young workers**

### **Summary**

Many young people work in shops, supermarkets and stores. But working in the retail sector can be hazardous, especially when you are young and new to the job. Some hazards, such as the risk of slips or falls, are found in many other industries. Others are more specific to the retail sector. You may be at risk from moving vehicles in delivery areas, falling objects, and strains on your body from lifting loads and making repetitive movements. You may also be at risk of being assaulted or threatened by members of the public. But there are things that can be done to control these hazards and risks effectively. By law, your employer must assess the risks that you face as a young worker, and put in place measures to protect you, including supplying protective equipment, providing training and supervision, and working out which jobs it is safe for you to do. You can also help to keep yourself safe, by following safety rules, using equipment as you have been trained to do, knowing what to do in an emergency, and finding out more about the risks you face and how to overcome them.

### **Facts about shop work**

Shops, supermarkets and stores are part of the retail sector, which employs, a large proportion of young people. Characteristics of the work include low pay, casual, part-time and weekend work, and increasing use of shift working with a high staff turnover. Over a quarter of workers work part-time<sup>6</sup> in this sector, and many of these are young workers, especially students still attending school or university.

Because this sector is undergoing a great deal of change, because it is a major employer of young, inexperienced workers, and because staff change rapidly (meaning that many workers will be new to the job), attention to health and safety is particularly important. Also, risks in the retail sector are not always obvious compared to some other types of work, which can mean that they are not so well-controlled.

### **Hazards and risks in shop and store work**

Shop and store work can expose you to a number of different hazards. They include:

- violence from customers;
- lifting loads;
- sprains and strains, for example from repetitive work;
- slips, trips and falls;



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- stress, bullying and sexual harassment;
- dangerous equipment, for example box crushers and meat slicers;
- hazards associated with moving and storing goods, such as objects falling from pallets and racking, stacking that is unstable or difficult to access, and unsafe ladders;
- moving vehicles in delivery areas;
- working unsocial hours.

Some hazards will depend on what is being sold.

### **Some definitions:**

- a hazard is anything that can cause you harm;
- a risk is the chance, high or low, that you will be harmed.
- risk control involves taking steps to reduce the chance, and /or the consequences, of the hazard causing you harm.

## **Preventing risks**

The law requires your employer to prevent you from being exposed to hazards, and provide you with training and information about them. If you are under 18, employers have to assess the risks to your health, and the suitability of the work you will be asked to do, BEFORE recruiting you. This means taking into account the relative lack of experience, maturity and risk awareness of young workers. Employers have to comply with national legislation restricting the number of hours that you can work, including nightshifts, the tasks that you can carry out, and the machines you can operate. If you are over 18 they still have to carry out a risk assessment that should take account of the experience, work abilities and training and supervision you will need to carry out your tasks safely.

## **Violence and verbal abuse from customers**

Violence from customers is all-too-common in the retail sector. Attacks can occur when staff have to deal with thefts and robberies, troublemakers, angry customers and drunk or drugged customers. Violence against staff includes attacks, intimidation, verbal abuse and harassment, and can make you anxious and stressed . It should not be seen as part of the job and you should not be blamed if you are involved in an incident. Preventing violence includes paying attention to: environmental design, safety and security devices, staffing levels, work practices, reporting, guidelines and training.

- your employer should have procedures for dealing with violence. Find out what are they are;
- your employer should provide you with instructions and training about in prevention measures to deal with violence, such as the procedures



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- to deal with shoplifting, robberies, abusive customers, the handling of money, racial and sexual harassment etc;
- especially as a young worker, you should not work alone at times of high risk;
  - never put your own safety at risk to protect goods or cash;
  - report any incidents that happen to you;
  - you may need advice or counselling following an attack.

### **Lifting and/or moving heavy loads**

Lifting and carrying is a common cause of injury among shop workers. The weight of the load, how far it has to be moved and how often, its stability, its shape and size, and whether you have to twist or stretch to lift it all affect the risks involved. Cramped storage areas, unstable racking, unsafe ladders and poor planning (such as putting heavy loads on top shelves) will increase the risk of injury. Your employer should take steps to remove the need for manual lifting, and reduce the risk you face in the remaining tasks<sup>23</sup>:

- they should provide mechanical aids and trolleys. Make sure you use them;
- they should train you in safe lifting, and how to spot and avoid risks;
- always use steps or a ladder when objects need to be put on or taken down from a high shelf. Never climb racking to retrieve goods;
- ask for assistance to lift or move something heavy or awkward;
- beware of overloaded or badly packed 'roll cages' (often used to deliver goods to stores);
- report any unsafe conditions, e.g. problems with trolleys, ladders, racking or shelving.

### **Sprains and strains (musculoskeletal disorders)**

Tasks such as lifting, reaching, working in awkward positions, working with tools that are difficult to use, and fast and repetitive movements can give us aches and pains. In some circumstances they can result in damage to backs, muscles, joints, tendons, and nerves. These types of injury are called musculoskeletal disorders or MSDs. Standing for several hours can cause backache and pains in the legs. But using poor seating for long periods can also be bad for you.

Supermarket checkout operators are one group of staff at risk. This is because of: repetitive reaching and handling of loads in awkward positions, at a fast pace; poor seating or a lack of it altogether; inadequate breaks; excessive heat or cold, and poorly designed till scanners.

Minor aches can develop into permanent, painful and disabling conditions over time, so you should not ignore them. Better designed tools,



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workstations and seating (especially seating that allows you to sit and stand), task rotation, and adequate rest breaks can all help to prevent you getting hurt.

- if you notice that you are working with awkward movements or in uncomfortable positions, or if you are getting aches or pains from work, report it;
- ask whether your work area can be adjusted to fit you better;
- if your work is sedentary, your chair should be comfortable and support your back, the backrest and height should be easily adjustable, and you should be shown how to adjust them. Report any problems with seating, e.g. if it is uncomfortable, if it won't adjust, or if it is unstable or broken. You may need a foot rest;
- see whether you can rotate the work you do;
- make sure you take your rest breaks.

### **Slips, trips and falls**

Slips and trips are a very common cause of injury, both to staff and customers. Wet or uneven floors, spillages and things being left on the floor are among the main causes. You should:

- report any unsafe conditions or accidents;
- wear footwear that will help to prevent you from slipping. Comfortable footwear is also important if you have to work standing up;
- keep objects off the floor, and out of passageways etc;
- clear up breakages/spillages quickly.

### **Training**

Your employer has a duty to provide you with information and training regarding risks and how to avoid them, free of charge and in work time, even if you are on a short-term contract or work part-time. You should:

- follow the advice and training that you have been given;
- do not carry out work that you think could involve a risk if you have not been given information and training in safe procedures. This includes things like using equipment, ladders and chemicals, and dealing with violent situations.

### **Further information and references**

#### **If you want to know more:**

Resources on young people at work and safety:

<http://ew2006.osha.europa.eu/>



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Information about individual hazards and risks in different workplaces:  
<http://osha.europa.eu/>

Factsheets for young people:

- Looking out for work hazards:  
<http://osha.europa.eu/publications/factsheets/66Factsheets>
- Your rights to safe and healthy work:  
<http://osha.europa.eu/publications/factsheets/65>

### More information on specific risks in the retail sector:

- [http://osha.europa.eu/good\\_practice/person/young\\_people/index\\_topi c?topicpath=/good\\_practice/person/young\\_people/shops\\_and\\_superm arkets](http://osha.europa.eu/good_practice/person/young_people/index_topi c?topicpath=/good_practice/person/young_people/shops_and_superm arkets)
- [http://osha.europa.eu/ThesaurusProxy/54161A/56761B/58921C/thesa urusitem\\_view](http://osha.europa.eu/ThesaurusProxy/54161A/56761B/58921C/thesa urusitem_view)
- [OSH Guidelines from the Danish Labour Inspection for Small Shops including Information for Young Workers](#)
- <http://www.at.dk/sw5790.asp>
- [OSH Guidelines for Supermarkets and General Stores including some Remarks for Young Workers](#)
- <http://www.at.dk/sw11066.asp>
- Health and Safety Authority.
  - Health and Safety at Work - Retail and Distribution Sectors  
[http://www.hsa.ie/files/product\\_20040615105646RetDist.pdf](http://www.hsa.ie/files/product_20040615105646RetDist.pdf)
  - Safety in Small Shops  
[http://www.hsa.ie/files/product\\_20051101023338shopsafety.pdf](http://www.hsa.ie/files/product_20051101023338shopsafety.pdf)



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11. Teens Affected By Workplace Violence.  
[http://www.masscosh.org/documents/teen\\_report2005\\_002.pdf](http://www.masscosh.org/documents/teen_report2005_002.pdf)