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FACTS

European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

Your rights to safe and healthy work - advice for young people

If you have an accident or damage your health at work you may have to live with the consequences for the rest of your life, and that's no joke. This factsheet provides information about your rights and responsibilities. A separate factsheet covers hazards you should watch out for.

What's the big deal?

According to European statistics, the work injury rate for young people aged 18-24 years is 50% higher than for any other age group of workers. Hundreds of thousands of young people in Europe suffer injury or ill health from work each year. Tragically some lose their lives and a few do not even survive their first day at work. Other work diseases and conditions such as cancers, bad backs or hearing loss develop slowly over time. Most of these tragedies could be prevented.

As a young person starting work, you may be more at risk if you are still not physically or mentally fully mature; and, if you are under 18 years old the law prevents you from doing certain hazardous jobs.

In addition, you are new to the job and new to the workplace so you lack experience of the job and awareness of the health and safety risks that can be present in the workplace, what your employer should do about them, and what you should do. The ability to recognise potential hazards and work safely requires common sense, but also observation, training and experience. You have the right to question things that look unsafe, but you may not feel confident to speak up, or you may go along with things because you want to prove to your employer and workmates that you are keen and not afraid.

Just statistics?

A 17 year-old, working at a bakery during her student holidays, lost part of a finger in a bakery machine. She had only been working for an hour when her hand was dragged into the machine. The faulty safety device had been reported but there was no planned maintenance. She had not received proper training about the machine and her supervisor was unaware that she was using the machine.

An 18 year-old working on a construction site died from his injuries when a crane dropped its load weighing 750kg on him from a height of 5 metres. Young workers were not properly appointed to jobs or properly trained, and the company was slack about following proper safety procedures.



Important stuff

Health and safety is not just about a load of stupid, boring rules. It is about keeping you safe and healthy now and protecting your future health so you can enjoy your life to the full. You should not have to risk life and limb at work.

In addition to being safe yourself, you need to know how to work without putting colleagues at risk. Think of how you would feel if something tragic happened to a work colleague because of something you did, even if it was not your fault.

Therefore you need to know about health and safety at work, what your employer should be doing to protect you, what you should do yourself and what your rights are.

Your boss is responsible for your safety

Every employer has a legal and moral obligation to protect you. They must identify the health and safety hazards in the workplace, assess the risks, and put in place preventive measures. A hazard is anything that could cause illness or injury. The risk is the likelihood that it will happen. Most accidents involve a failure either to assess risks properly or to take action to control risks. Issues include noise, handling chemicals, lifting, trailing wires, sitting at computer screens all day, and even bullying from managers or fellow workers. Employers are also obliged to provide specific protection for groups of workers that may be particularly at risk, including young people. For example, they should provide you with work that is within your capabilities and make sure you are properly supervised.

Extra protection if you are under 18

If you are under 18 there are special protections that apply. Specifically, you cannot do work that:

- is beyond your physical or psychological capacity;
- exposes you to toxic substances;
- exposes you to harmful radiation;
- involves health risks from extreme temperatures, noise or vibration;
- could cause accidents because you lack experience or training or attention to safety.

Unless you are over the minimum school leaving age, it is necessary for your vocational training, you have competent supervision and your employer can guarantee proper protection.

Factsheet 'Protection for young people in the workplace' provides more details of task, age and hours restrictions, and the strict limitations according to age on 'light' holiday and after school work if you are under the minimum school leaving age and you are permitted to work. Check national legislation for the precise requirements.

Get with it - Know your rights

You have the right:

- to know what hazards are present in your workplace, what you must do to keep yourself safe, and what action to take if there is an accident or emergency;
- to receive information, instruction and training on these matters, which should be specific to the job and free of charge;
- to be provided with the necessary protective equipment, free of charge;
- to participate, by asking questions, reporting any unsafe practices or conditions, and being consulted by your employer on safety matters.

If you have any doubts about the safety of any aspects of your job and what you are asked to do, you have the right and the responsibility to bring your concerns to your supervisor's attention. Ultimately you have the right to refuse to do unsafe work. You do not have to do something dangerous, just because your boss tells you to or because everybody else does it.

Get with it - Act responsibly

Safety is not all down to your employer and work is not a game. By law you must take care of yourself and others, and cooperate with your employer on health and safety. For example, you must:

- follow all the safety rules, instructions and training including for using equipment and machinery, safety devices or personal protective equipment such as gloves or masks; and
- report any health and safety hazards to your supervisor.

Getting help

- Talk to your boss about the problem.
- Talk to your worker safety representative, or trade union if there is one.
- If there is a doctor, nurse or other workplace occupational health staff, talk to them. And if you visit your family doctor with a complaint, tell them what work you do.
- Talk to your parents.
- Talk to teachers if you are still in education or inform the work experience/job placement organisers.
- Talk to an adult whom you trust.
- If necessary, contact your health and safety inspectorate to make a complaint.

Get in the know: resources on young people and work safety at <http://ew2006.osha.eu.int/>; information about individual hazards and risks in different workplaces at <http://osha.eu.int/>; sources of information include your national health and safety authority, trade unions and trade associations.

More information on guidance for Great Britain available from <http://www.hse.gov.uk>

More information on legislation for Ireland is available at: <http://www.hsa.ie>

More information on legislation for Malta is available at: <http://mt.osha.eu.int/legislation>

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