



24.47 Working In Construction– Key Health Facts

Introduction

Construction (and demolition) work can expose workers to several direct & indirect health hazards.

In addition to the obvious risks from noise, dust and vibration, there are less obvious ones such as the poor lifestyles encouraged by transient and mobile work (living out of hotels) & the mental health toll of being away from family & friends for extended periods.



Direct Health Risks

Construction work, by its nature, is often transient. Just under half of workers are self-employed or sub-contractors which means that their long-term health is not considered or managed. When health surveillance available or undertaken, it's sporadic and "poorly joined up". Health problems could include:

Cancer

Construction work has the highest level of occupational cancer amongst the industrial sectors. It accounts for over 40% of occupational cancer deaths and cancer registrations. Estimates suggest that past exposures cause over **5,000 occupational cancer cases** and approximately **3,700 deaths** annually. The most significant cause of these cancers is **asbestos** (70%) followed by silica (17%).

Silicosis and Lung Disease

Exposure to **Respirable Crystalline Silica (RCS)** can cause several respiratory diseases such as **Lung Cancer**, **COPD**, **Silicosis** as well as other health problems. Inhaling these fine particles leads to permanent lung damage.

Exposure to **fumes** and dust from other processes such as from **painting** or exposure to **diesel fumes** account for around 6% of construction related deaths annually.

Skin problems

Dermatitis and other skin problems are common in construction due to the harsh environments encountered and the dust and chemicals that workers are exposed to.

Noise Induced Hearing Loss

Construction sites are noisy places. Sound levels are often high enough (85 dB or more) to cause **permanent hearing damage** or **tinnitus** which gets worse with continued exposure. Working in noisy environments can **be stressful** and cause **social isolation** which can have a negative impact on a **worker's mental health**.

Hand Arm Vibration Syndrome

Work with powered hand tools such as **breakers**, **whackers** and **Stihl Saws** are a major source of vibration exposure. Over time, this exposure can lead to occupational diseases such as **Vibration White Finger (VWF)** and **Vibration Induced Carpal Tunnel Syndrome (V-CTS)**. These conditions are debilitating and usually get worse with continued exposure.



Whole Body Vibration

This is a musculoskeletal injury caused by the body bouncing up and down. It is often associated with driving vehicles over rough or uneven ground and results in back, neck and joint pain. Exposure increases with speed and duration and can lead to debilitating problems.

Indirect Health Risks

Poor Lifestyle

The transient nature of construction work means that workers often live away from home for long periods, in hotels, guest houses & hostels. This results in a **poor diet** (eating “pub food” regularly). The culture often leads to excessive consumption of **alcohol** due to boredom or peer pressure.

There is little opportunity for exercise outside of the worker’s normal job. Many older workers **smoke** which, in addition to the obvious risks, also compounds workplace exposures, making respiratory disease much more likely.

Poor Mental Health

This is a major issue in construction. Long hours, tight deadlines, job insecurity, and a tough “macho” culture cause high rates of stress and anxiety. Being away from family for long periods results in feeling of loneliness & isolation.

Key findings from a recent CIOB report show up to 94% of workers experiencing stress over the past year, 83% experiencing anxiety and 60% experiencing depression. 28% of the respondents reported experiencing suicidal thoughts at least once over the past year.

What should I do?

- Ask your employer to introduce a robust programme of health surveillance and occupational health. Look for work that requires Safety Critical certification.
- Raise health (including mental health) concerns with your family and GP.
- Try to adopt a healthier lifestyle.
- Take time out to address health issues in a timely fashion.
- Talk earnestly about how you feel with someone that cares.

Further reading

Construction workers can access free, confidential mental health help 24/7. Call the Construction Industry Helpline on **0345 605 1956** for mental health support, financial aid, or debt management. You can also text **HARDHAT** to **85258** or visit:

<https://www.constructionindustryhelpline.com/our-app.html>

Health & Safety Executive (HSE):

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/index.htm>

A copy of this & other documentation can be found from <https://mohs.co.uk/resources> or using the QR code at the top of this page.